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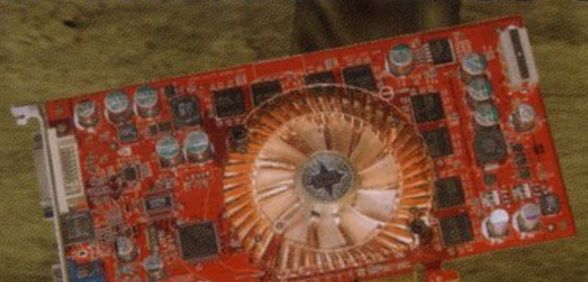

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PO Box 1037, Bondi Junction, NSW 1355
Tel: (02) 9386 4666
Fax: (02) 9386 4288
E-mail: pcga@derwenthoward.com.au

Editorial
Editor Mark Donald
Production Editor Dan Toose
Deputy Editor Ross Atherton
Hardware Editor Jere Lawrence
Disk Editorer Dan Toose
Art Editor Mark Wynne
Designer Matti Puckridge
Deputy Art Editor Amanda Neal
Staff Writer Craig Pearson
Staff Writer Tim Edwards
Contributors Jon Hicks, Simon Pickstock, Steven Williams, Tim Stone, John Walker, Richard Cobbett, Al Bickham, David Griliopoulos, Always Black, Jim Rossignol, Matt Pierce, Neil Hardman, Andy Lowe, Kieron Gillen, Chris Buxton

Photography In-house images taken with the Nikon Coolpix 995 digital camera

Production
Senior Production Co-ordinator Kirsty Bell
Production Manager Sue Wall
Commercial Print Buyer Colin Polis

Advertising
Ad Manager Joshua Hodge
josh@derwenthoward.com.au
Tel: (02) 9386 4666

Publishing
Publishers Jim Flynn, Nathan Berkley
Creative Director Jane Menon

Subscriptions
E-mail: subscriptions@derwenthoward.com.au
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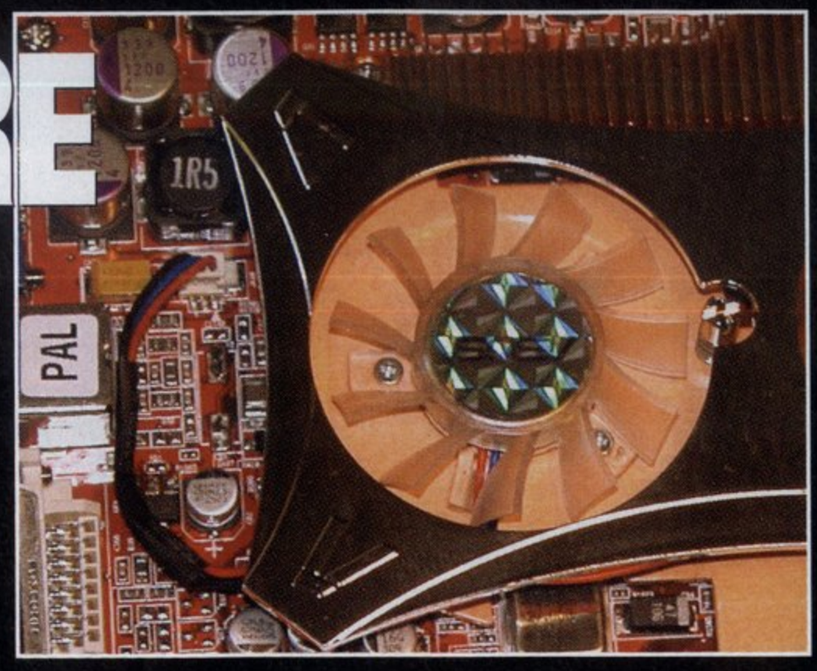

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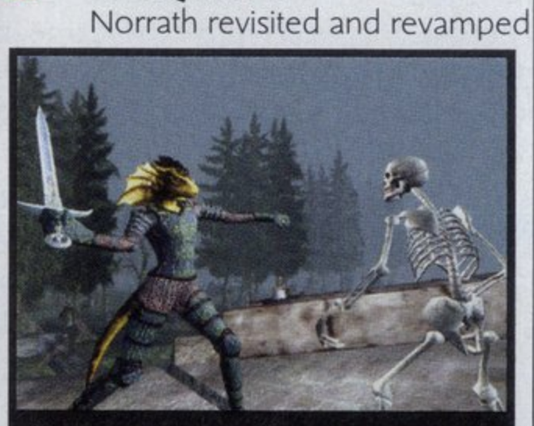

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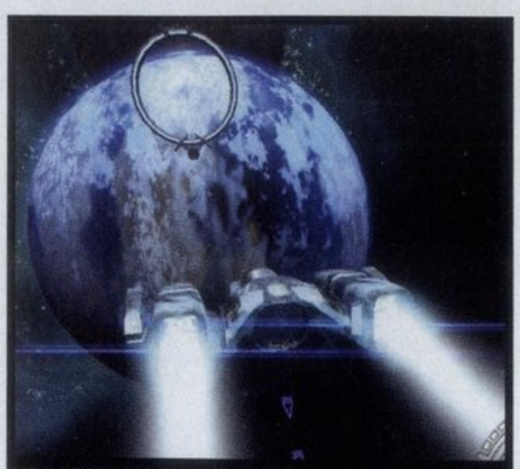

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SCOOP! YOUR FIRST LOOK AT...

HITMAN: CONTRACTS

Guess how many silent kill techniques Agent 47 knows, and win a free throttling.

By AL BICKHAM

DEVELOPER PROFILE

IO INTERACTIVE
Country Denmark
Established 1998
www2.ioi.dk

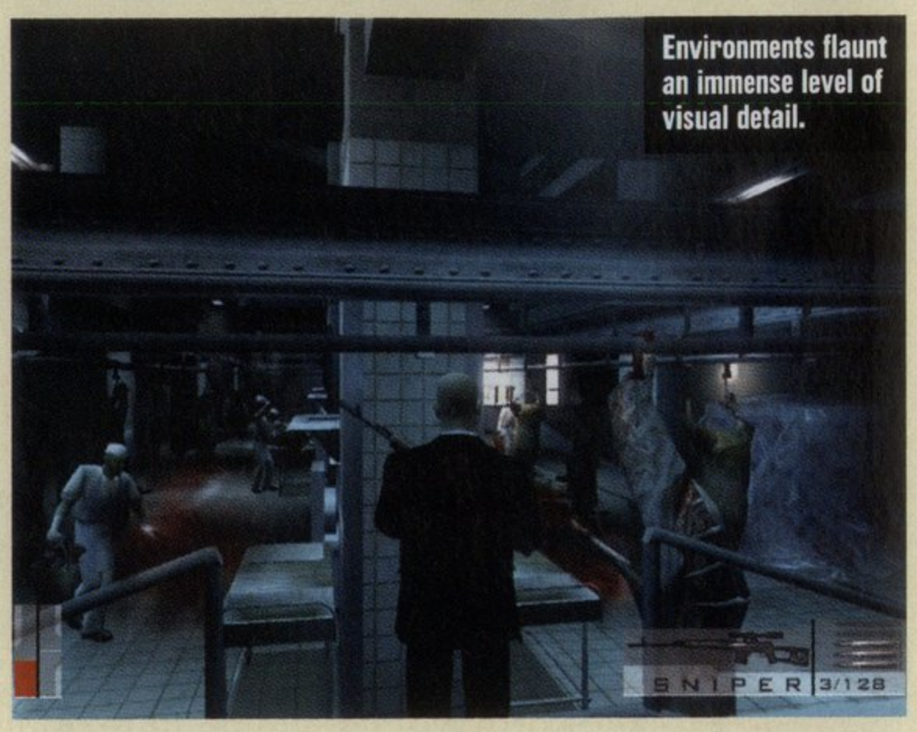
IO Interactive are a quality Danish outfit, developing cross-platform games that always seem to make a respectable name for themselves. Clearly fans of the films of Luc Besson, IO have created two previous *Hitman* titles. They're also the creators of *Freedom Fighters*, the commie-lamping third-person adventure.

Previous Games:
Hitman: Codename 47, Hitman 2: Silent Assassin, Freedom Fighters

SLUMPED on the floor of his Paris apartment, a white-hot bullet grating against his ribs, 47 finds himself with little to do but think. And as time spins out before him, he finds himself reviewing a life spent in the game of death. It's a mucky old game, this hitman lark. And 47 has been so very, very busy.

That's how *Hitman: Contracts* opens, setting a wholly retrospective scene. The game isn't a new chapter in the *Hitman* tale: it puts you through some of the most grisly and shocking missions from 47's past. Of course, they're all new to you, so don't be concerned that you're getting re-hashed content from the previous games.

No details have yet been released concerning individual missions, but IO are promising a grisly death-fest, with *Hitman*'s trademark stealth-based approach. In matters technical, the 'Glacier' game engine has undergone heavy tweakage, and is reported to run five times faster than it did in *Hitman 2*. Of course, this won't make the game itself play faster, but it means that environments can be more heavily populated, and display a much higher level of detail. All of which means it's going to look pretty fruity.



Environments flaunt an immense level of visual detail.

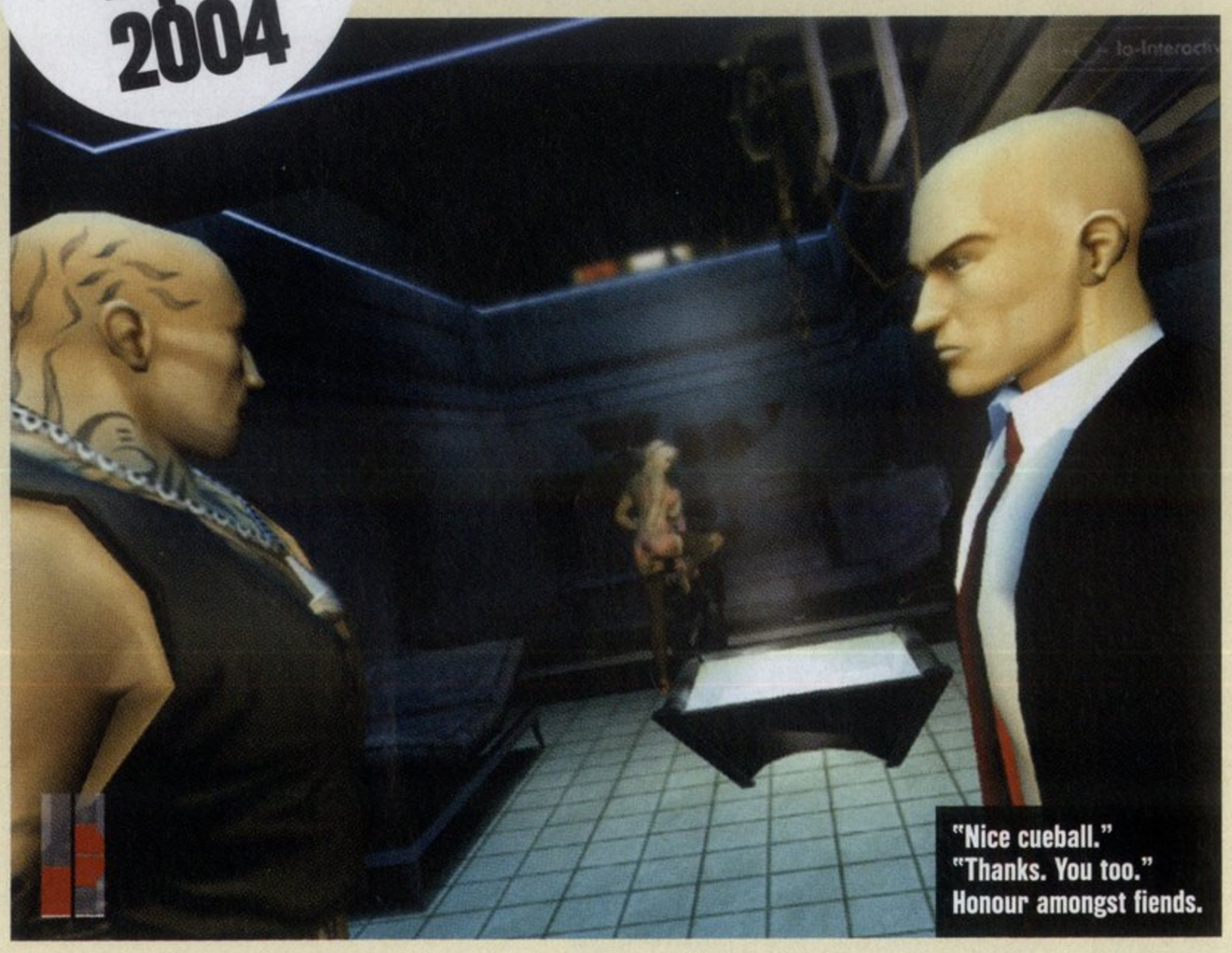
That's assuming you can get close enough to your foes, however, as IO Interactive are claiming a far more advanced level of AI than before. Teams of goons will now gather together in bunches and sweep areas, rather than simply walking standard patrol routes. Plus, they communicate information to each other – such as your last known location. That should keep us on the hoof.

Given the upgrades *Hitman 2* received over the original, it's clear that IO listen to community criticism, and attempt to remedy features that people find problematic. And a major criticism of the second game was the fiddliness of the controls. *Hitman: Contracts* sets out to provide a slicker experience using instant-access stealth commands, a streamlined inventory system and a generally more intuitive control system. In addition, IO have eliminated the 'wall hacking' problem that meant you could accidentally target enemies through the corners of walls and other solid objects. 'Accidentally'. Yeah, right.

"AS AN INCENTIVE, AS YOU STRANGLE MORE ENEMIES NEW AND MORE EXPLICIT ANIMATIONS ARE UNLOCKED..."

Release April 2004

Players of *Hitman* and *Hitman 2* will already be familiar with 47's talents in the gruesome offings department, and this is where the new game should really shine. Alongside a much larger range of both noisy and stealthy weapons, 47 boasts some nasty new strangulation animations. And there's a growing incentive to whip out the garrotte and get choking, because as you strangle more enemies, new and more explicit animations are unlocked.


"Nice cueball." "Thanks. You too." Honour amongst fiends.

Contracts looks a lot more moody and atmospheric than its predecessors, thanks to the use of warm and cold lighting, so expect a game pregnant with dark ambience – and even more tension. We're looking forward to having more choice, particularly when it comes to silent take-downs. The *Hitman* games have traditionally made it difficult to get stuck in with full automatics; you'd simply attract a rapidly expanding herd of goons, and when bullets hurt you so very much, engendering such an engagement was tantamount to suicide. However, in limited circumstances, a bit of AK action worked just fine; whether IO will let us loose with a grander arsenal is as yet unclear, but we're also hoping to see some blazing shootouts, as a kind of occasional release valve from the lengthy sessions of high-tension sneakery that the game will doubtless demand.

We'll revisit *Contracts* when we get our hands on some working code, but in the meantime, bask in these lovely screenshots and check out the trailer, which can be found at www.hitmancontracts.com. Oh, and we hear that brasso works a treat on foreheads, so get polishing.

COMING SOON!

Eidos are keeping the really gory details under their hats (ick) but have promised us more meaty morsels next issue.

- **Genre** Stealth/adventure
- **Developer** IO Interactive
- **Publisher** Eidos

HITMAN: CONTRACTS WILL CHOKE YOU UP BECAUSE...

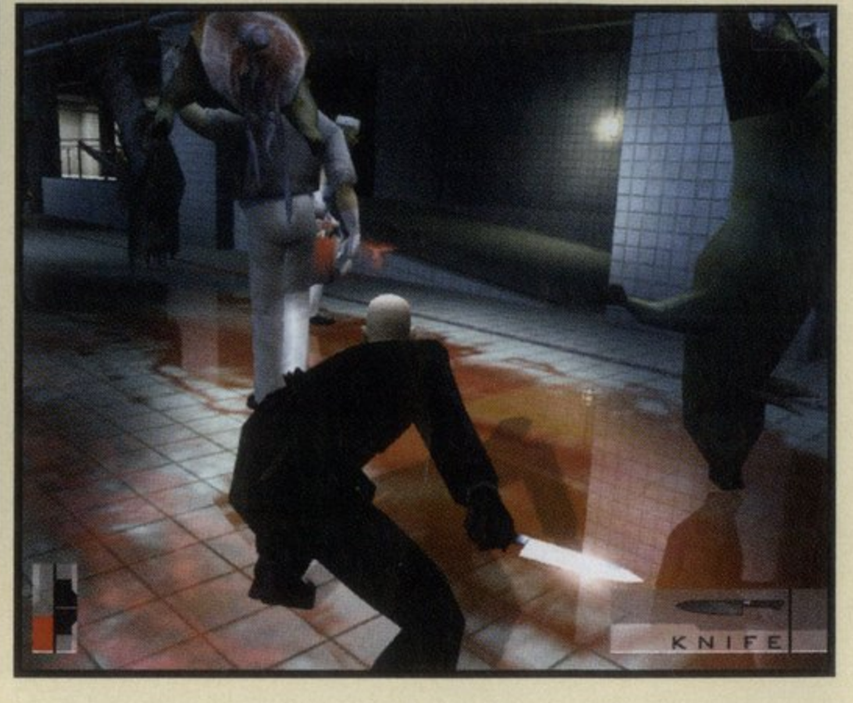
- It's darker, moodier and grislier.
- Strangulation – it's the new headshot.
- It's an exposé of 47's grim past.
- It's a technical leap on from *Hitman 2*.

Try not to shoot the nudey lady, there's a good chap. Whether there'll be a penalty for wasting folk indiscrimately isn't yet clear.

It's clearly impossible to blend in sometimes, which makes stealth your only ally.

UPCLOSE ATMOSFEAR

Stalking your enemy through the clinical grotesquery of an abattoir... the pools of congealing blood, the low lighting, the liquid flash of the blade as it buries itself in your enemy's back. IO are really going for an atmospheric experience here, as this shot demonstrates. It also illustrates just how much more advanced the visuals are, with reflective liquids and real-time lighting. Make sure you've got your DirectX 9 card installed.



SCOOP! YOUR FIRST LOOK AT...

PERIMETER

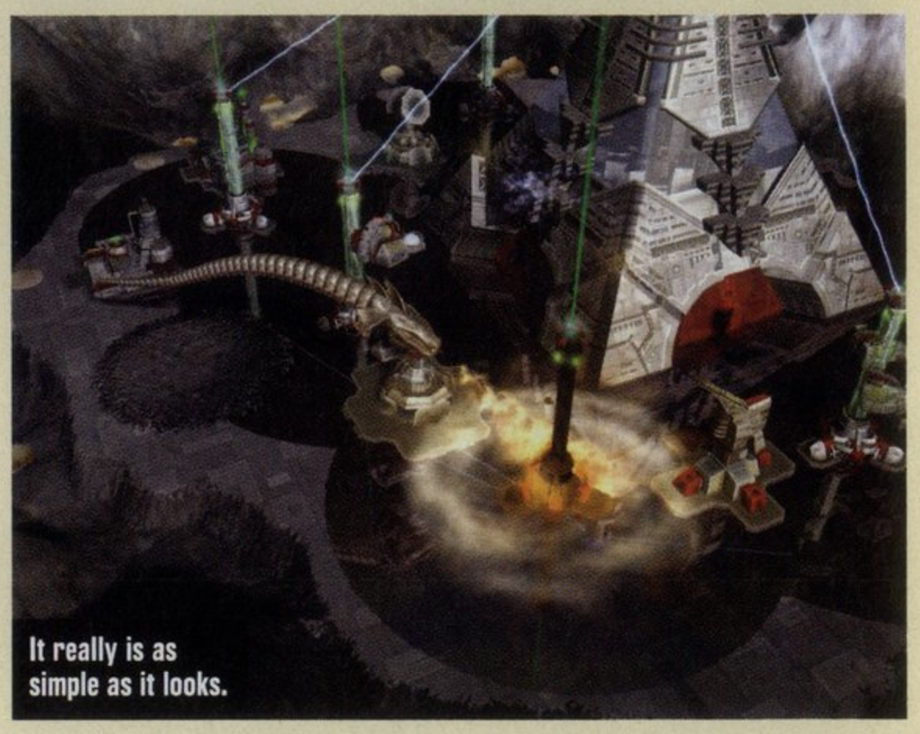
We won't be sitting on the fence with this one.

By MARK SUTHERNS

IF *C&C Generals* was the epitome of the American military mindset, with its brainless, Big Mac, big gun cheesiness, then *Perimeter* is very much the Russian equivalent. Atmospheric, enigmatic and incredibly complex, K-D Lab's real-time strategy title is the sort of RTS that could turn Kasparov into quivering jelly.

Thankfully, the game's sci-fi premise eases you in gently, although it will no doubt have been expanded into some sort of huge scale mind-bending Asimov style backstory come release. Here's the gist. You're in control of the Exodus civilisation, exiled from Earth, and now searching for a new home while contending with rival human civilisations. The single-player campaign will have you planet-hopping as the story unfolds, colonising new worlds, clashing with rival civilisations and local alien pests. That's the easy bit.

It gets more headswimmingly complicated when you attempt to get to grips with what else is being hardwired into the game. Firstly, *Perimeter* will be the first 'Real Terraforming Strategy' title, which, hyperbole aside, translates into the ability to dynamically alter the map during play – an RTS feature that has been a long time coming. Think of yourself as a spacesuited Charlie Dimmock, as Ground Force meets *Ground Control* to create a whole new school of strategy gaming. You'll get to morph mountains out of molehills, forming defensive moats around your civilisation while piling slag heaps around your opponent's, while both of you compete for usable territory in order to harvest the game's single resource: energy.



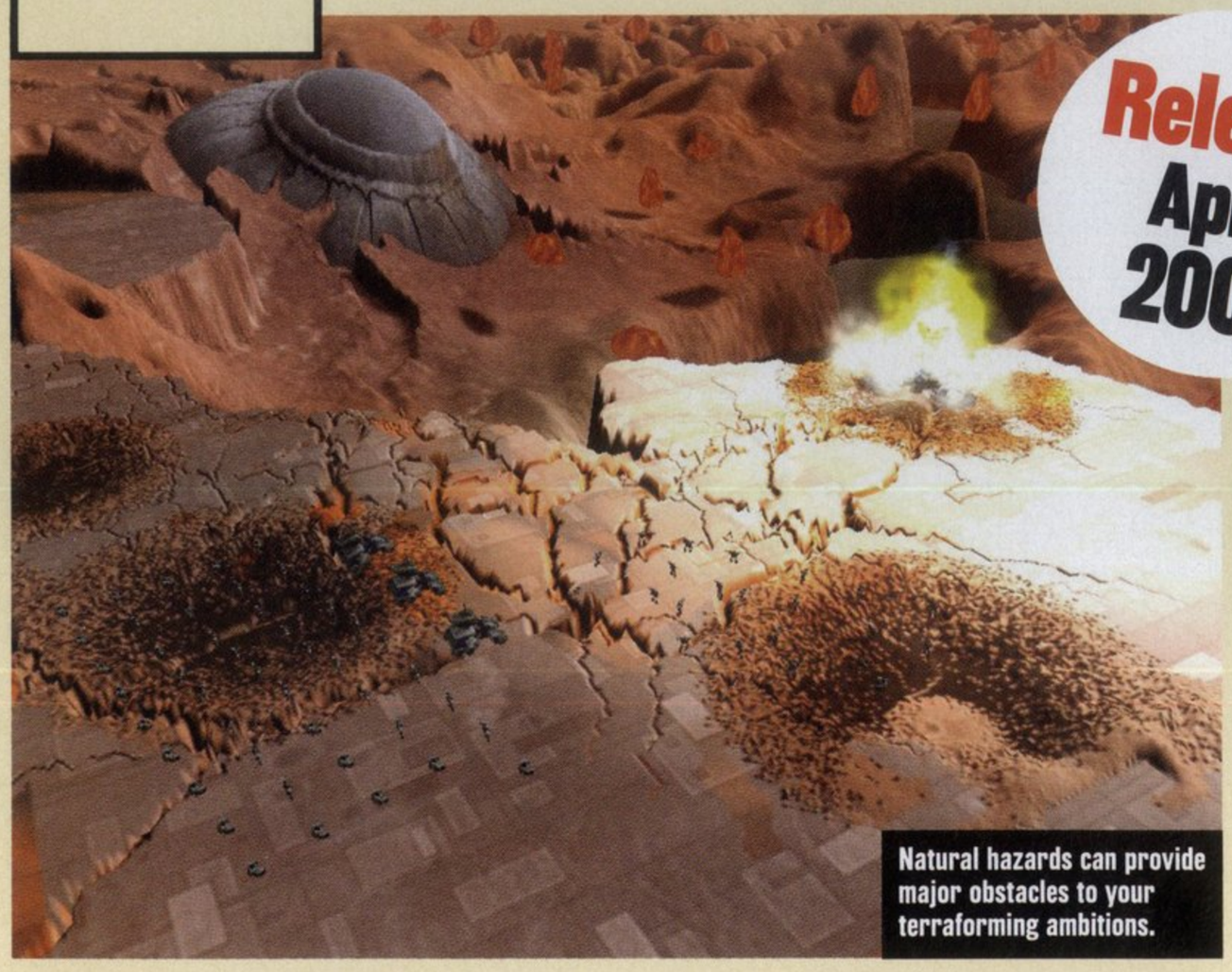
It really is as simple as it looks.

It's this precious commodity that powers all your units and, more significantly, your vast perimeter force shield. This awesome defensive wall spans your civilisation's mobile central core, the 'Frame'. Its scale and lifespan are determined by the number and location of energy cores you place around the map. The more land your civilisation can occupy, the more energy you can reap and the bigger an area your shield can cover. Inevitably, this kicks off a bitter struggle for land, piling on thick, gooey layers of strategy as you battle your rivals for Lebensraum and energy sources, with the aim of eventually enveloping them within your mighty perimeter shield.

"YOU'LL GET TO MORPH MOUNTAINS OUT OF MOLEHILLS, AND PILE SLAG HEAPS AROUND YOUR OPPONENT'S CIVILISATION."

Naturally, you'll need an army of units to fight the good fight and, again, this is an area where K-D Lab have refused to toe the common RTS line. Instead, *Perimeter* opts for a similarly hybrid approach to unit building to that of *Impossible Creatures*, offering three standard unit types and a raft of nanotechnology upgrades (See 'Nano Nano') which can be mixed and matched to mould a unique force. Things get even sexier when you realise that units can be transformed, Terminator 2 style, within seconds, allowing you to rush your opponents with waves of grunts and then turn them into heavy artillery once you've broken their lines. Know your enemy? That's highly unlikely in *Perimeter*, adding yet another delicious twist to this heady Russian RTS cocktail.

Beautiful, brainy and irresistibly intriguing, this game has finally got us excited about the dozing RTS genre once more. *Perimeter* has built its force shield around an Easter release date, and is closing inexorably in.



Natural hazards can provide major obstacles to your terraforming ambitions.

Release
April 2004

COMING SOON!

We'll break through the defences to bring you the latest on this slice of chin-stroking strategy with the review expected for our June issue.

DEVELOPER PROFILE

K-D LAB

Country Russia
Established 1995
www.kdlab.com

Formed by a small band of maths and physics boffins from Kalingrad University, K-D Lab now employ an 18 man team. Their first release came in 1997 with an award-winning freeware title, *Biprolex*, which was soon followed by their only major title so far, the complex, genre-busting strategy of *Vangers*, released by Buka Entertainment in 1998. Bizarrely, an arcade racer, *Spanking Runners*, came next but only saw the light of day in their home country. Since 2001 then the team have been working on the impressive technology of *Perimeter*, clearly their most ambitious project to date.

Previous Games
Vangers: One for the Road

- **Genre** Real-Time Strategy
- **Developer** K-D Labs
- **Publisher** Codemasters

PERIMETER WILL TAKE YOU TO THE EDGE BECAUSE...

- You can shape its sci-fi worlds to see off invading hordes.
- Its shield device doubles as an all-powerful defensive and offensive unit.
- Transforming nano-units lend themselves to all manner of sneaky strategies.
- It's yet another eye-fondling game world to explore.

Energy Output = 6700
Multiplication Factor = 2.6
Efficiency Factor = 0.9067
Real Energy Output = 15795
Used Energy = 12730
Free Energy = 3065
Put up the shield and watch your energy supplies drain away before your eyes.

UPCLOSE NANO NANO

Yes, *Perimeter*'s pick and mix approach to army building does smack of *Impossible Creatures*, but hopefully there will be no sinister lion/hedgehog creations or hopelessly unbalanced sides on show here. In *Perimeter* three basic unit types – soldier, officer and technician, can be upgraded by up to five levels, and then combined to form dozens of unique units. Nanotechnology enables morphing from one type to another, using up a stack of your precious energy but swinging the course of battle.

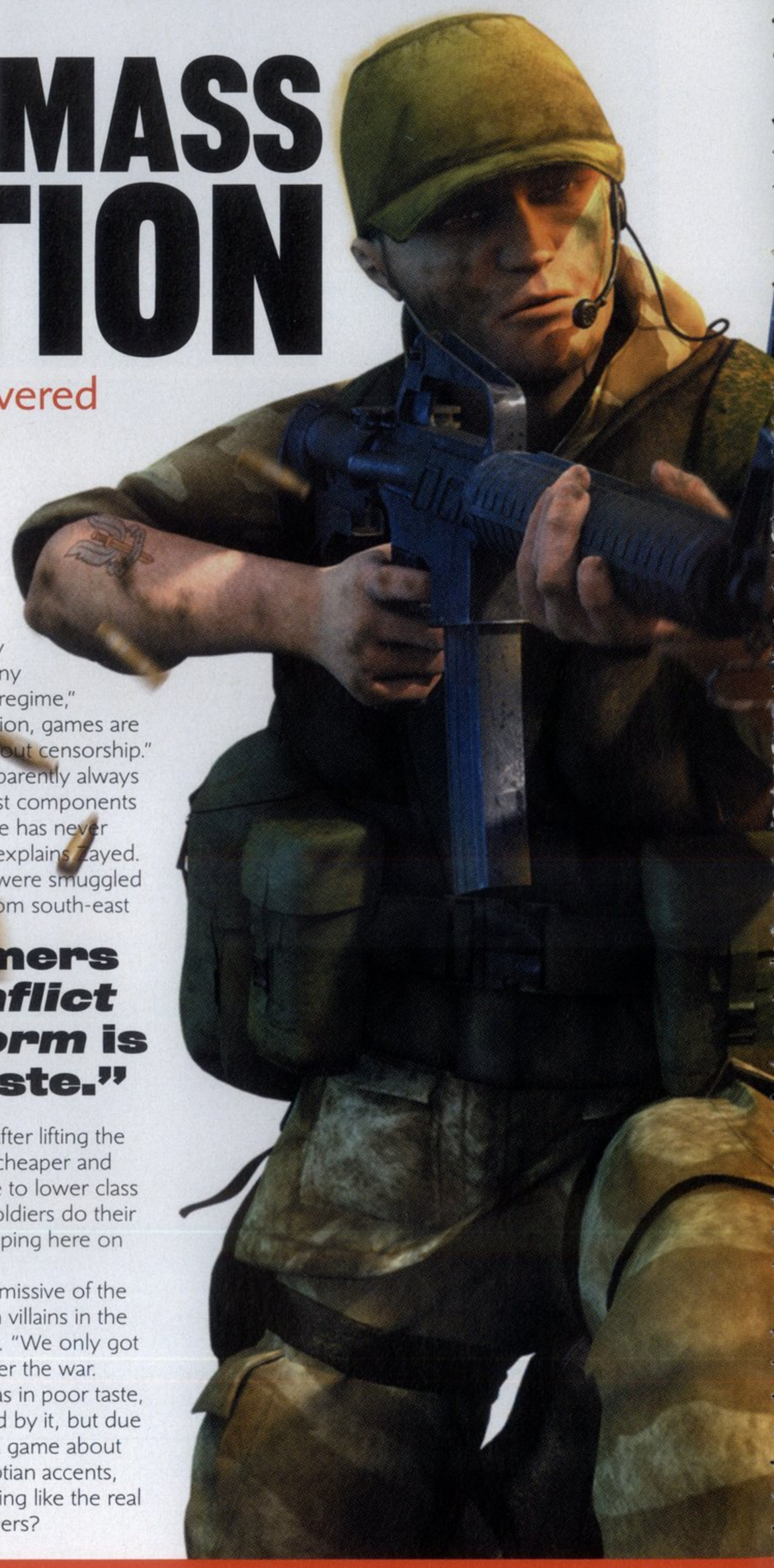
It's a laser light show to make Jean Michel Jarre weep over his keyboard. Good.

EYEWIT

THE PC GAMING UNIVERSE IN 13 PACKED PAGES!

SPECIAL NEWS REPORT

WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION

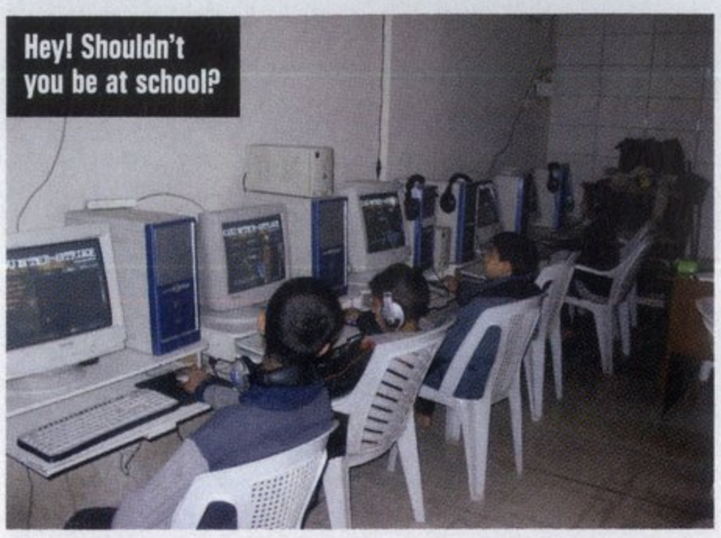


An Iraqi blogger lifts the lid on the undiscovered hardcore gaming scene in Baghdad.

"You will find LAN cafes in every neighbourhood. About 10-20 computers are linked together and gamers play for hours. Sometimes in major streets in Baghdad there are many LAN cafes linked together which make a great source of fun for LAN gamers." These are the words of Zayed, a 24-year-old Iraqi dentist, giving us our first insight into the Iraqi gaming scene.

According to Zayed, Iraq's gaming community spans all urban classes. "It isn't unusual to find middle-aged men playing games in LAN cafes, but children under 16 constitute the bulk of gamers. You rarely find women playing in public but many do play at home. Games are more popular in metropolitan areas such as Baghdad, Mosul and Kurdistan, but they aren't popular in the Shi'ite south."

Iraqi tastes, it seems, are no different to western tastes: Zeyad explains that "games played on LANs include *Red Alert*, *Empire Earth*, *Counter-Strike*, *Unreal Tournament*, *Medal of Honour* and *FIFA*. Competitions are held all the time. Al-Ruba'i Street in Baghdad has tens of LAN cafes very close by, so clans would reserve a cafe and they would play with other clans in nearby cafes. Before the war, clans would play all night till the early morning."



Hey! Shouldn't you be at school?

The removal of the many state controls has allowed the videogame community to flourish. "Any new game that entered Iraq had to be tested by the Ministry of Information for any possible mention of Iraq or the regime," explains Zayed. "Since the invasion, games are more free to pour into Iraq without censorship." Meanwhile, PC gamers have apparently always found it easy to acquire the latest components for their machines. "PC hardware has never been difficult to obtain in Iraq," explains Zayed. "The latest chips and hardware were smuggled in through Jordan and Turkey from south-east Asia. The only difference now, after lifting the sanctions, is that PCs are much cheaper and therefore much more accessible to lower class Iraqis. In fact, many American soldiers do their PC hardware and software shopping here on Al-Sina'a Street."

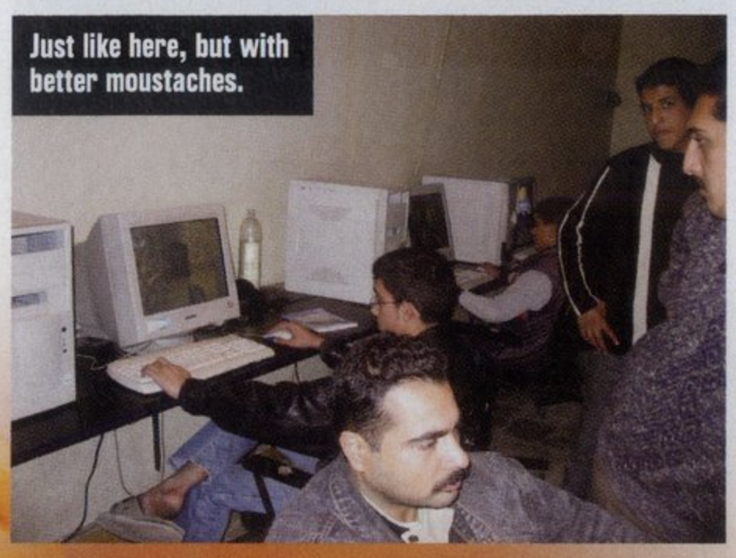
"Iraqi gamers think *Conflict Desert Storm* is in poor taste."

Unsurprisingly, Zayed is dismissive of the stereotyping of Iraqis as cartoon villains in the latest wave of soldier simulators. "We only got to play *Conflict Desert Storm* after the war. Many Iraqi gamers thought it was in poor taste, not because they were offended by it, but due to the fact that it didn't feel like a game about Iraq. Iraqi soldiers talked in Egyptian accents, and the level terrains were nothing like the real Iraq." Are you listening, developers?

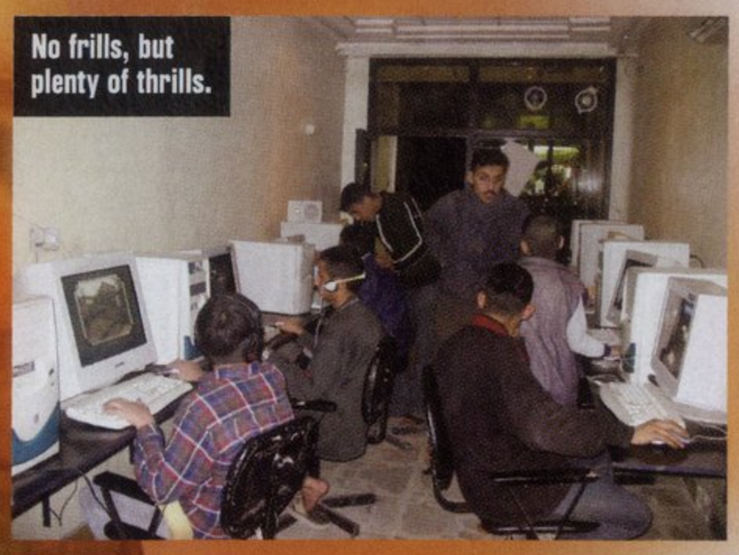
TNESS

The gaming community grows ever wider, as the rebuilding of Iraq allows the population to finally come online. And it should come as no shock that in Iraq, videogames are enormously popular. We tracked down the original Iraqi gamer, to hear his thoughts on the Iraqi PC gaming scene.

TIM EDWARDS, STAFF WRITER



Just like here, but with better moustaches.



No frills, but plenty of thrills.

So when will Iraqi gamers be able to meet and frag their western counterparts? Surprisingly soon. Work continues on the rebuilding of Iraq's telecommunications infrastructure. According to the US Agency for International Development, the organisation responsible for contracting out the restoration of Iraq's services, a high tech exchange has just been built in the Baghdad district of Al Mamoun, while repairs have begun on Iraq's fibre-optic backbone, at a cost of half a billion dollars. The result of this investment? Baghdad's first fully-fledged internet gaming cafe will be opening shortly.

Further Information

http://healingiraq.blogspot.com
■ Zayed's blog. Street level gossip, Iraqi political opinion and the latest *UT* news.
www.usaid.com
■ The reconstruction of Iraq, as described by civil servants and penny pinchers.

BAGHDAD BACKCHAT

ZEYAD

GAMER

"Many years ago I had an XT 8086 PC. At that time I had discovered Sierra adventure games. I spent several hours a day playing games like *King's Quest, Police Quest, Leisure Suit Larry*. I was fascinated with them. These games served a great educational effect on an 11-year-old. Two years ago I returned to PC games. My all-time favourite has to be *Unreal Tournament*. I am trying to start my own CTF clan here."

'VOKURA'

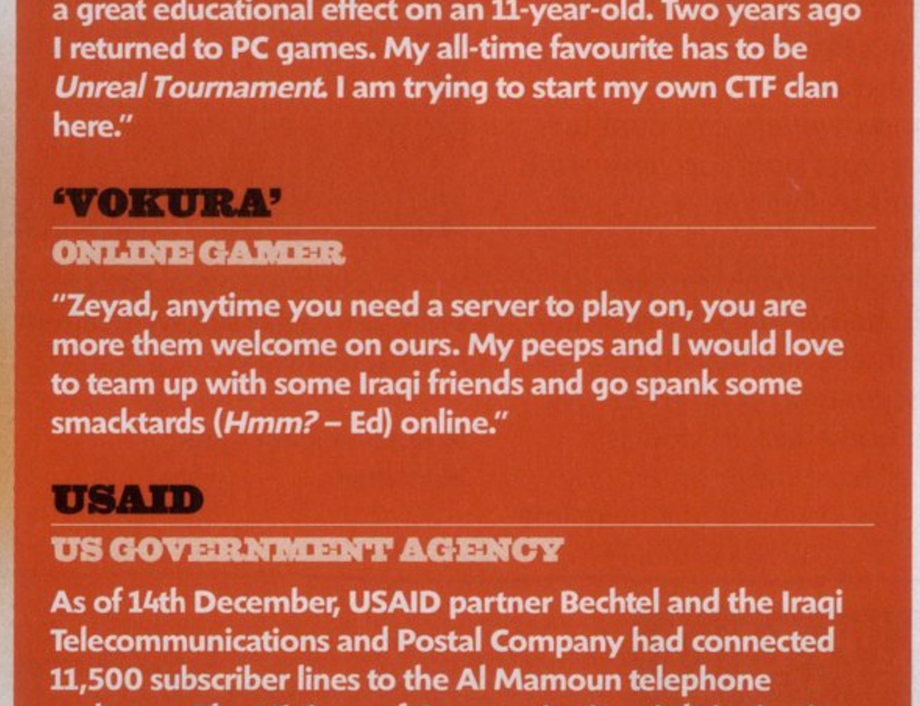
ONLINE GAMER

"Zeyad, anytime you need a server to play on, you are more them welcome on ours. My peeps and I would love to team up with some Iraqi friends and go spank some smacktards (*Hmm?* – Ed) online."

USAID

US GOVERNMENT AGENCY

As of 14th December, USAID partner Bechtel and the Iraqi Telecommunications and Postal Company had connected 11,500 subscriber lines to the Al Mamoun telephone exchange. The Ministry of Communications is bringing in additional workers from outside Baghdad to expand the workforce and accelerate progress.



Baghdad gamers, looking forward to kicking our arses online.

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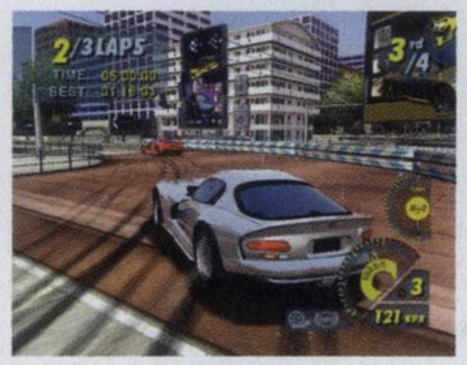
Championship Manager with cuddles?
AIRBORNE TROOPS
No tandem jumps here.
14 **JUICED**
Get your crew and race some cars. On the street.



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A bit like Amelie, but with swords. And blood.
16 **TRUE CRIME COMP**
Not entering would be deemed an offense.
NEXUS
It's back. Again.
STAR WARS GALAXIES
Cheque out a Jedi.

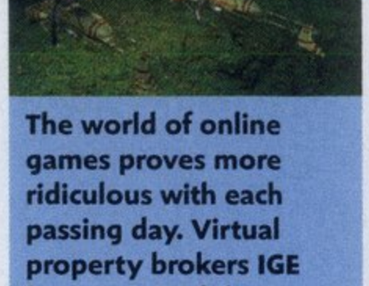
17 **DEVIL'S ADVOCATE**
Our trident of truth.
18 **THE SPY**
Snippets from the silent.
20 **GRAPHICS R.I.P.**
Life and times of an orc?

GOBBETS

FUNNY MONEY

The world of online games proves more ridiculous with each passing day. Virtual property brokers IGE have acquired the property of their nearest rival, Yantis Enterprises, for US$10,000,000. Both companies trade in items that exist solely online, such as houses in *Star Wars Galaxies*, which they sell on via online auction. See www.ige.com for more.

RELOCATION, RELOCATION



Yet more on this virtual property nonsense. Origin have decreed that *Ultima Online* players who haven't visited their virtual homes in 90 days shall return to find them destroyed, thereby freeing up precious space. Hilariously, it means that people have been squatting in areas they'd like to set up home in, and fights have broken out between original homeowners and prospective land-grabbers. For more head to www.uo.com.

SLAY BY MAIL

Two *Counter-Strike* players are in trouble with the law after they mailed guns to each other. The teenagers, one from America who mailed an AK-47 and one from Canada who mailed two pistols, met online six months ago when playing *CS*. Naturally the game is being blamed. The fact that the American boy's mother was able to buy the gun for him, or that Americans can buy assault rifles for 'hunting', clearly had nothing to do with it.

ACTION ADVENTURE

BLOODY WATERS
TERROR FROM THE DEEP

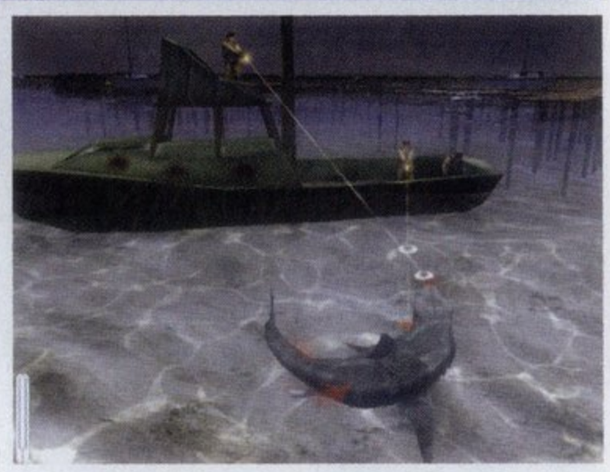
Time to wet your appetite. Is this your alter-Ecco?

Bloody Waters tells the tale of a genetically re-engineered shark, out for revenge. A shark that must use its enhanced strength to prey on swimmers, before ultimately taking on its tormentors. Sublime stuff. This being the land of the great white shark and all, *Bloody Waters* is a game we've long been looking forward to.

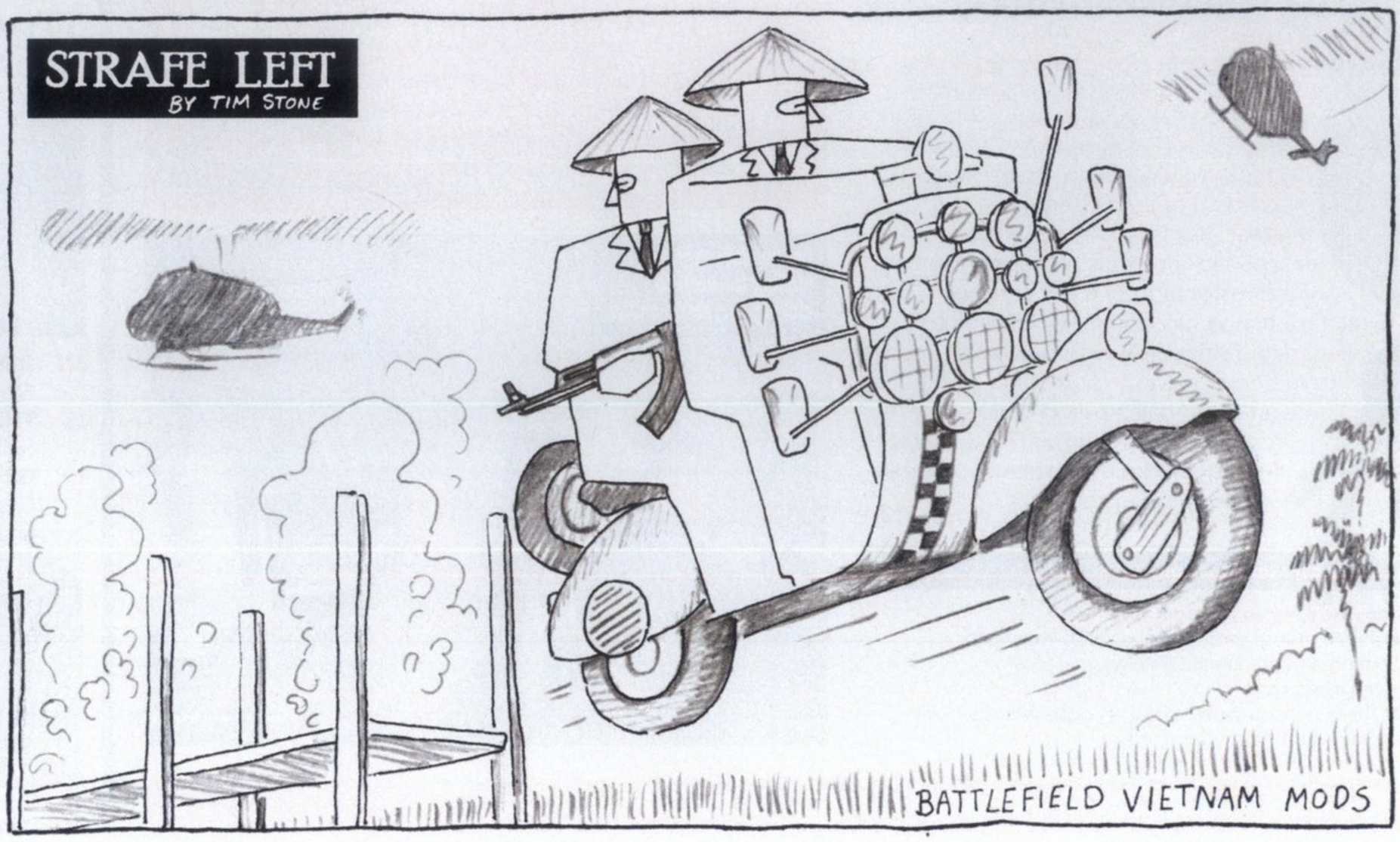
OK, it sounds daft, but brilliantly so. What we've seen so far makes this refreshingly different from the usual generic gubbins. The marine environment is fully interactive, with a huge freeform playing area to swim around in. Additionally, you're not confined to the ocean. In a B-movie twist, it's possible to psychically take control of shark worshippers (don't ask) and run around on land with them. The land dwellers can hunt for extra food for you, open up new areas and even sacrifice themselves to aid your survival.

With fully deformable models, it's possible to rip humans limb from limb, tear boats to shreds and drown their recipients before using your tail to toss the shredded body back to land as a projectile. We'll have more on *Bloody Waters* soon, but just think of it next time you're out for a swim, completely oblivious to the sinewy death-machine lurking below.

"We're going to need a bigger hard drive."



■ **Release date** Late 2004
■ **Website** www.pineapple-interactive.com



REAL-TIME STRATEGY

DESERT RATS VS AFRIKA KORPS

Use a tank to catch a rat.

Monte Cristo's latest real-time strategy offering is mere weeks away from completion, and the early indications are promising. Set in the relentless desert terrain of North Africa during WWII, it presents the war through the eyes of both German and English forces, as you take each side to glory in its own campaign.

The struggle between Axis and Allies in North Africa was characterised by massed tank battles, and this is something that Monte Cristo are taking pains to reproduce. In essence, it's a limited-forces RTS, in a similar vein to *Ground Control*, where the micro-management of your units is required to make the best of tricky situations, and resource gathering is but a distant memory. However, you get a choice when it comes to unit selection; before every mission, you're granted a number of military points to be spent on your army. Obviously, taking a bunch of heavy tanks into a situation where you really need infantry is a daft idea, so it's very important to follow your briefing, and take note of what kind of force the enemy will be fielding.

Funny. They don't look like rats...

The early version of *Desert Rats vs Afrika Korps* we've been playing has impressed us with its fluid animations, gorgeous visuals and its sense of realism, so we're hoping for good things from the finished game. In addition, the combat has a real punch behind it – tanks rock on their tracks, guns recoil and vehicles crow-hop off the ground as large-bore shells punch through armour. We'll have more detailed coverage for you closer to the release date.

Very orderly. Must be Fritz.

■ **Release date** TBA
■ **Website** www.desertratsgame.com/

SPORTS MANAGEMENT

PRO RUGBY MANAGER

Like *Champ Man*, but with more hookers.

The bony crunch as boot meets solar plexus; the cauliflower-ear inducing tackles; the unstoppable juggernaut of the scrum. All these things and more are yours to enjoy with *Pro Rugby Manager*, the game that does for rugby what *Championship Manager* did for football (soccer). After the Poms won the World Cup, this title was inevitable really...

And if it's detail you want, it's detail you'll get. The game features 15,000 statistics-laden real-world players from teams across the globe. Naturally, these clubs are all licensed, and your job is to train them, pay them, and take them through various professional competitions, such as the Tri-Nations, Six Nations and of course the World Cup.

Needless to say, training and practice is only half the battle. The real money-shot comes in the form of the matches themselves, which are portrayed via developers Cyanide's real-time 3D engine. Moreover, you're not forced to sit back and watch in horror as team tactics begin to fail and the opposition gets the upper hand; you can alter tactics on the fly to counter the enemy's thrusts and get your team working the way it's supposed to. All of which sounds rather promising, we're sure you'll agree.

■ **Release date** March 2004
■ **Website** www.prorugbymanager.com

Where's the mud?

THIRD-PERSON

AIRBORNE TROOPS

All-new GIs! Now with wings.

Who can forget those harrowing scenes in Band of Brothers, where the 101st were airdropped into Normandy, only to land scattered and confused in alien territory? That's the premise of *Airborne Troops*. As a US paratrooper, you land alone and must infiltrate the area in an effort to contact the French Resistance. Intriguingly, the game charts just the first 48 hours of events following the airdrop.

Developed by Gallic coders Widescreen Games, this intriguing third-person adventure is slated for an autumn release, and promises stealth and frantic firefights in equal measure. So pack up your troubles in your old kit bag... it's back to Normandy. And this time, Private Ryan can save his own ass.

■ **Release date** Spring 2004
■ **Website** www.widescreen games.com

GOBBETS

CALLED UP

In addition to the Spy's discovery of a *Call of Duty* expansion pack, we can reveal that Activision intend to carry on with the series beyond the upcoming console editions, developing it as a *Medal of Honour* style series. Which. Is. A. Good. Thing. Visit www.callofduty.com for more on Activision's bruising war game.

NOT DISCO!

***The Fall: Last Days of Gaia* is a post-apocalyptic RPG set in 2038. A global catastrophe has wiped out most of mankind, with only the dregs of civilisation remaining. It's up to you to support the 'Government of New Order' as they try and help the remaining members of society with water, food and weapons. Either enforce the law, or the world falls to the mercenaries. For more, look at www.the-fall .com**

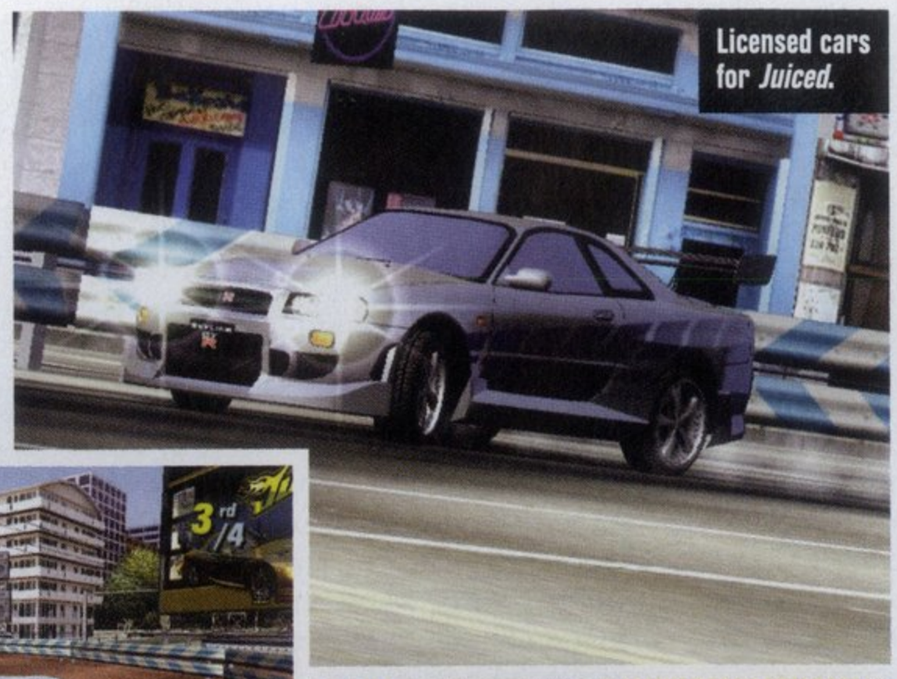
JUST LIKE THE OLD DAYS

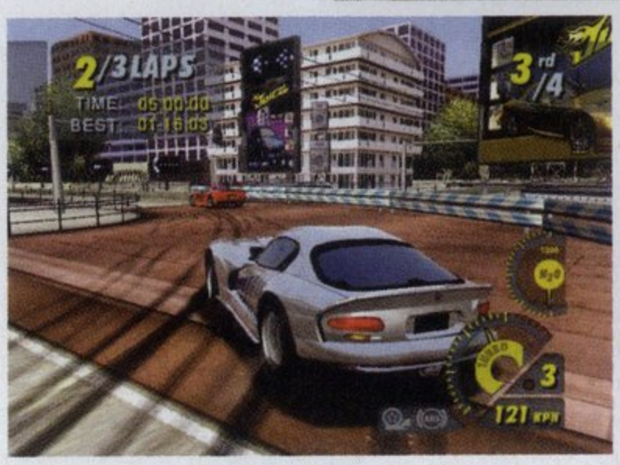
Hornby have announced they're bringing Scalextric to the MMO market, with an internet-based Scalextric set to be released soon. The machine will allow six cars to be raced over the internet through the Scalextric Sport World System. Players with the same track layout will be able to compete in nine different race modes through their PCs. The kit includes track design software, overtaking sections, and even pit-stops.

RACING

JUICED

Squeezing every last drop out of the racing genre.


Licensed cars for *Juiced*.

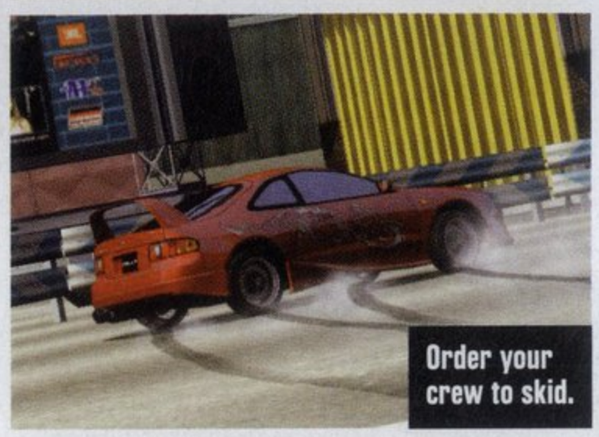


Following on from the massively successful *Need For Speed: Underground*, here's another racer with huge potential. From Juiced Games, the people behind the sadly defunct *Lamborghini*, *Juiced* is the latest game intent on taking street racing to the next level.

It's got an interesting idea pounding away at the heart of it. You're not just a lone racer, but part of a crew. And as anyone who's had a crew knows, they've got your back. If you've not quite got the car specs to race with, one of the crew will take your place, enabling your team to score points. Even more interestingly, if you're in a race that includes members of your gang, you can issue them orders to block other cars.

Additionally, you'll have access to 50 fully licensed vehicles from the likes of Nissan and Mitsubishi. The cars are fully moddable, with a massive bank of configurable components to add, alter and strip from the car, as well as the typical decal and paint options. So you can make them look hot as hell as they're cruising at high-speed through fully mapped-out streets. After all, style is just as, if not more important than winning in this sort of racing scene.

Further to this car madness is the fact that *Juiced* will be the first game to use the Reebok CyberRider fitness bike. Hmm. We don't know exactly how this will fit into a car racing game, but we're looking forward to finding out. We think. More on *Juiced* in a future issue. It's definitely one to look out for.


Order your crew to skid.

- **Release date** Summer 2004
- **Website** www.juicegames.com

ROLE-PLAYING GAME

BEYOND DIVINITY

Gaminess is next to godliness.

To divinity... and beyond!

The follow-up to Larian Studios' *Divine Divinity* is in the pipeline, and has shed its original title of *Riftrunner* in favour of *Beyond Divinity*. Following in its predecessor's footsteps, it's a vast, sprawling affair, packed with quests, sub-quests and hairy bug-bashing romps.

This time around, you've been soul-bonded with a Deathknight, a rather nasty member of the evil git fraternity. Naturally, he's none too chuffed either, you being a bit of a goodie two-shoes and all, so your task is to learn the lost art of rift-running (less of the sniggering, you at the back there), which will enable you to separate the bond. It's either that or carry a devil on your shoulder for the rest of eternity.

Green matches not included.

Larian are promising a completely new combat system and enhanced interface, which will please anyone who played the original – as complex and compelling as it was, the interface was a bit on the soupy side. In addition, the game features a random quest generator, which should add to the variety, and eschews the single-character approach for a combat party. Sounds divine, no?

- **Release** April 2004
- **Website** www.beyond-divinity.com

STRATEGY

JOAN OF ARC

Burn, baby, burn.

From the 12 year-old girl who had visions of the saints, to an iron-clad leader of armies, it's safe to say that Joan of Arc had a rather eventful life. And let's not forget the human barbecue thing. Thankfully, Enlight are only presenting the middle part, in which Joan and her soldiery begin to boot the marauding English out of France.

The game comes on like a hack-and-slasher, putting you in control of Joan in the third person as she carves her way through hordes of English soldiers. However, there are strategic elements on offer too, in which you control the armies of France during battles and sieges. Check out the demo (DVD only, we're afraid) this month, and see what you reckon.

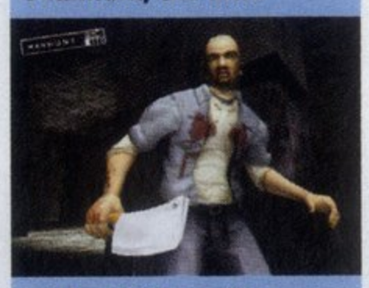
- **Release** Autumn 2004
- **Website** www.enlight.com/joa

GOBBETS

FAÇADE OFF

From the people that brought you *Petz*, *Façade* is an artificial intelligence art project, which will be free to download (when completed). It takes the form of a one act play, with you as both observer and participant in the dissolution of a couple's marriage. It's rumoured to include voice recognition software for use in talking the grieving couple through the painful process. Most curious. More at: www.quvu.net/interactivestory.net

GORYTELLING



***Manhunt*, the ultra-violent PS2 snuff game, is making its way upmarket. In a conference call, Take Two execs announced their intention to take the controversial title to the PC in 2004. For those who don't know, *Manhunt* features a convicted killer forced into slaughtering thugs on camera for the delectation of an unseen director. (Screen shot from PS2 version.)**

TELLIN' Y'ALL IT'S SABOTAIN

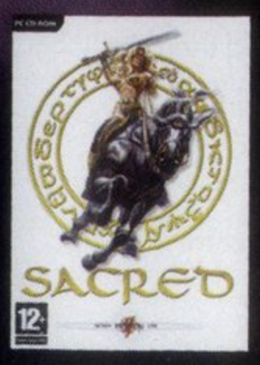
Despite being dumped from CDV's release schedules last year, *Sabotain: Break the Rules* is now back on track. It's a first-person action RPG with malleable morals and side-switching abilities, handy if you're part of the Confederation and decide the Empire is a better prospect. Sabotage and duplicity play a large part in this intriguing game, and we're keeping a close eye on it. More at: www.akella.com/pub-sabotain-en.shtml

a roleplayer's fantasy.

"This is the Fantasy Action Adventure Reinvented"
- NVIDIA

www.sacred-game.com

SACRED



- Huge world to explore on foot or horseback, comprised of 16 incredibly detailed regions, from woodland & desert to ice mass & wasteland
- Unique player characters such as the Seraphim & Vampiress
- Over 30 missions with hundreds of sub-quests
- Innovative combo system that combines combat & magic abilities
- Co-operative & pvp multiplayer modes

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GOBBETS

IT'S TRUE

Activision's *GTA*-a-like *True Crime: The Streets of LA* is coming screeching to the PC. The console versions were well received, if not quite met with the same hyperbole that *GTA* or *Vice City* enjoyed. Most criticisms were along the lines that the game was less freeform, albeit with a far better combat system. It'll be out before the end of the year, so for more on this genre-merging skidder, head over to www.activision.com/microsite/truecrime

HAVE A GUNSOR AT THIS

Shrapnel games have announced they're bringing a Falklands-based RTS to the PC. Developed by ProSim, the as-yet-unnamed game promises to cover all aspects of the unfortunate '80s conflict, including the water-based assaults, the bombardments and the stealthy special forces insertions. For more on this sure-to-be-controversial bit of coding, head over to www.shrapnelgames.com.

IT'S A GUY THING (SADLY)

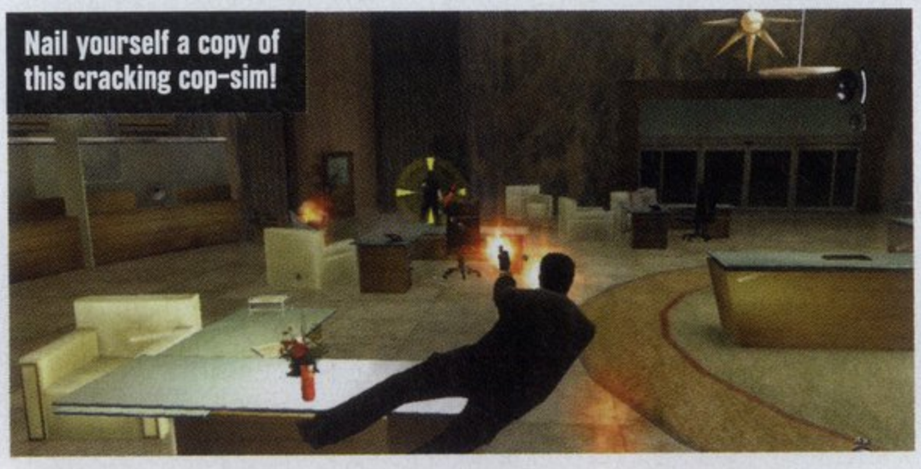
Top Heavy Studios have announced they're to bring the rather sad-sounding *The Guy Game* to the PC. The premise comes across like a bad-taste reality TV gameshow, with live video clips of girls answering questions. If they get the questions wrong, they have to expose their breasts. The more times you correctly guess who'll get the questions wrong, the more you'll see of their breasts.

COMPETITION

TRUE CRIME STREETS OF LA

Here's your chance to steal it for yourself!

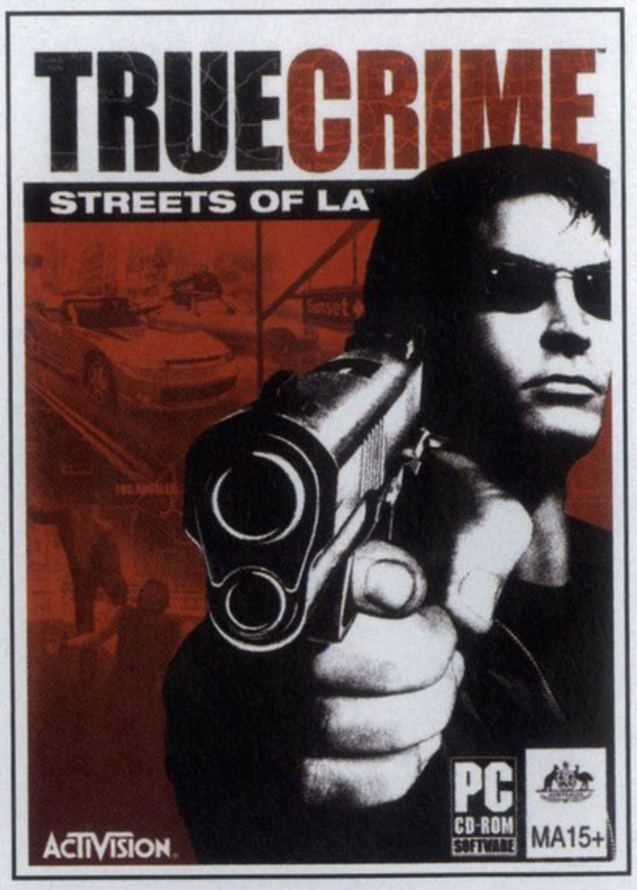
You know how it is... Whenever there's a good gun-totin' game on consoles, it's only a matter of time before we get a more polished production on PC. Activision's *True Crime: Streets of LA* is just such a game, with most of the city of Angels painstakingly reproduced for hot-shot (and hot-headed) undercover cop, Nick Kang. It looked good on console, and with our loads of RAM and cutting edge GPUs, we know the PC version will be a stunner.



The question is, will you be a stunner in a brand new *True Crime* t-shirt? Will you be groovier listening to your own copy of the *True Crime* soundtrack? More importantly, will you be playing your very own copy of the game rather than just having us tell you how good it is?

Well at this point the answer is no, but things could change if you're any better at explaining why you should should be receiving all three of the above courtesy of the generous folk at Activision in 50 words or less.

To have a shot of winning one of the three *True Crime: Streets of LA* bundles, just fashion your ultra-witty answer, along with your name and contact details in an email addressed to: **pcga@derwenthoward.com.au** with 'True Crime Comp' as the subject. Alternatively you can snail mail it to:
'PCGA - True Crime Comp'
PO Box 1037, Bondi Junction NSW 1355.
Note: All entries are judged by the PCGA editor whose decision is final.



- **Closing date 20th April 2004**
- **Website www.truecrimela.com**

ROLE-PLAYING GAME

STAR WARS GALAXIES

For sale: a Jedi. One careful owner.

A Jedi account on *SWG* has sold on eBay for $4,050. The auction took place over a 24-hour period on 14th January, and rose from $1,000 to the winning amount, with 15 bids for the young Jedi Padawan.

Both seller and winner remain anonymous, with the buyer purchasing a fairly basic starter Jedi with 1.5 million credits in one slot, and a master Artisan with half a million credits in another slot. Resident *Galaxies* expert Mark Sutherns reckons the characters would have taken one to three months work to develop, representing a pretty hefty return on the investment.

It's just another example in the recent trend we're seeing where in-game items and property gain a hefty real-world value. In fact, anything online can be bought for real money, including land, equipment, weaponry and pets. With this making a serious impact on how MMORPGs are designed and played, developers are more aware of their creations lining the pockets of other people. How long before a backlash occurrs? More on this strange phenomenon next issue.

- **Release date Out now**
- **Website www.starwarsgalaxies.com**

STRATEGY

NEXUS

More names than a royal child.

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," as somebody on Star Trek once observed. He might have been talking about the rather impressive *Nexus*, previously known as *Imperium Galactica III* and *Galaxy Andromeda*.

Back on track after being dumped by publishers CDV, this visceral tactical space game is now set for an overhaul, and considering it's been on the go since 2001 that's not a bad thing. We'd warrant an engine overhaul is probably in order. HD Interactive is the game's new home, where MD Mike Klumper told us: "I was amazed by what I saw of the early code of *Nexus*. I was blown away by it and we are extremely proud to add this beautiful title to our portfolio." But then, he would say that, wouldn't he?

Nexus has you playing as a lone pilot who returns to Earth after a battle to find it's been conquered by aliens. It's up to you to discover the last remaining humans, build them up and lead them in an almighty assault on the evil alien invaders. More soon.

- **Release date September**
- **Website www.hdinteractive.com**

ILLUSTRATION: STEVE LILLIE

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

RANTINGS FROM THE SOAPBOX OF GAMING

HOW CAN YOU DEFINE THE MEANING OF 'GOOD' IF YOU DON'T KNOW THE MEANING OF 'BAD'? PASS COMMENT ON PC GAMES ADDICT'S NOVEL SOLUTION: **PCGA@DERWENTHOWARD.COM.AU**

You can never have too much of a good thing, or so the saying goes. But that's not really true. Spend your days guzzling nothing but double chocolate chip ice cream and you'll soon be glad to see the back of it (you'll be glad just to see your feet). No, we need to wallow in the mundane every so often, the better to taste the extravagant, and that's something that just maybe we can also apply to games.

Everyone's a critic, but if you want to be a proper critic you have to know how to criticise everything. There's no use quibbling over whether *Vice City* deserves 94% instead of 93% if you don't understand why it got above 90 in the first place. So here's my request: play bad games. No... better than that. Play *all* games. Play brilliant games, sure, but also play awful, poor, average, so-so, humdrum, shoddy, dull, not quite there, moderate, dire and decent games.

If we spend time learning about the faults that make lesser games such lacklustre experiences, examine those structural errors, and compare and contrast, we may just realise a measured, universal understanding of where things stand on the marking scale.

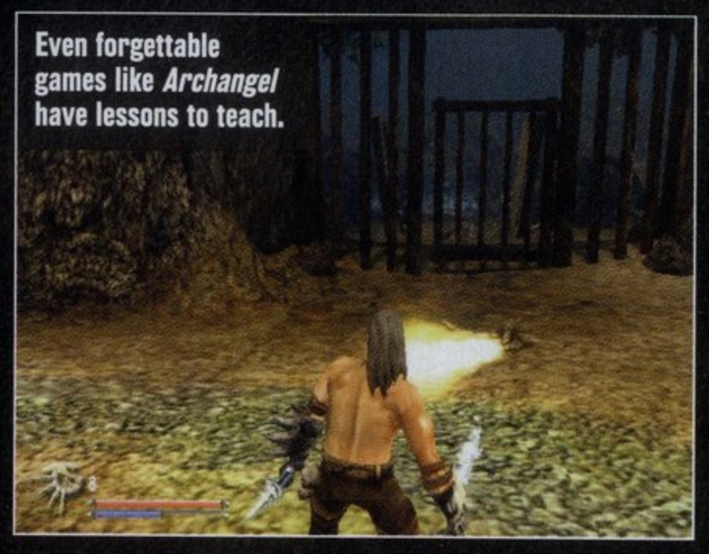
While you're playing, though, prepare for the horrifying truth: you might actually enjoy what you're doing.

Hey, don't worry. It's perfectly natural. While only a rare handful of games can produce instantaneous loathing through crashes or the kind of design decisions that make you question the value of the human race, most are capable of ensnaring the player in a net of formulaic comfort. Think of the *Myst* series (the first three at least), and how it's possible to go through the games at an amiable, leisurely pace without once throwing your mouse down in rage. Those are the ones we should be wary of – those games that project enjoyment through familiarity of experience and the fettered joys of progress. The ones which provoke the faint praise of "it's not that bad", while deep in the credibility centre of your brain you know that you shouldn't like it.

You need to know your enemy. Know what separates the great from the good, know what the original *Tomb Raider* meant against the faulty, failed, 'not that bad', *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness* – and the best way to do that is through experience. Learn why the best games are the best by playing the worst.

Ultimately, consider the main point: a wallow in the mire of mediocrity renews faith and fondness in what those titles at the top of the gaming tree are accomplishing.

James Lyon is the secret thirteenth recipient of the fabled PC Games Addict diploma of comprehensive gaming nouse and has spent more time scrounging off a student lifestyle than most. He once had a cake *and* ate it.



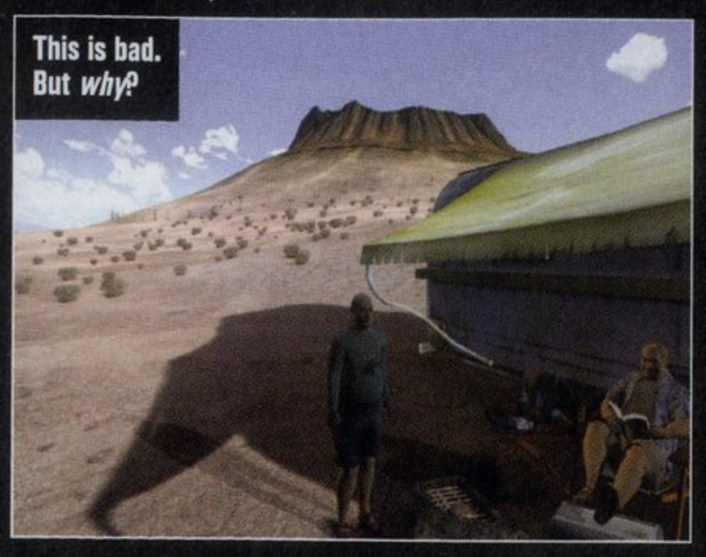
Even forgettable games like *Archangel* have lessons to teach.

"Prepare for the horrifying truth: you might actually enjoy what you're doing."

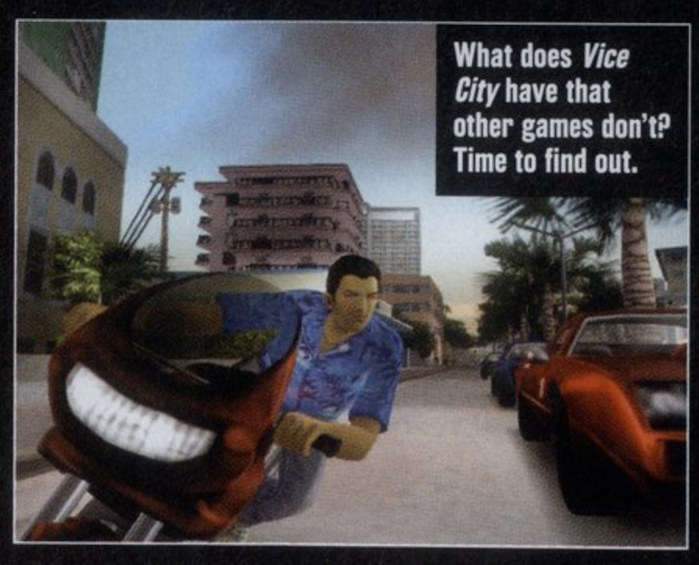
The great thing is, it's easy to do. Poorer games often get discounted pretty quickly. Some shops even offer a 'no questions asked' returns policy, enabling you to spend some time educating yourself on the scale of quality with a game of questionable merit before returning for something better.

If the prospect of purchasing anything below 90% morally disgusts you or your bank balance, however, then have a look at the coverdiscs. PC Games Addict crawls over broken glass every month to bring you the latest demos, but not every last one of them is a game to write home about. Think of these lesser works as a way to gain a greater understanding of what I've just been talking about. They may not be full games, but they're as good a practical education in the varying values of the commercial market as you're going to get for no extra cost.

So, are *you* sufficiently in control of your opinions to judge if what you're playing is merely by-the-numbers output or the pinnacle of gaming excellence? I want you to try and understand the process that causes PC GAMER to sift out those gems that deserve to shine among the multitude. It can be a thankless task to play something that looks and feels merely average, yet in the end aren't we rewarded with the knowledge that we've refreshed our (sometimes less than grateful) appreciation of the sweetest liquid in the gaming barrel?



This is bad. But *why*?



What does *Vice City* have that other games don't? Time to find out.

GOBBETS

FALLOUT BUNDLE

Those still teary-eyed over the demise of *Fallout 3* can hold onto this comforting morsel of goodness. Avalon Interactive are bundling *Fallout*, *Fallout 2* and *Fallout Tactics* in one wholesome package, cleverly dubbed the *Fallout Collection*. And it's all at a wallet-friendly price, so if you have never suckled from the irradiated nipple of gaming goodness that's *Fallout*, then you've no excuse not to. In fact, by the time you read this, it'll be out.

THAT'S ARMOURE

If you fancy planning Halloween early, you could do much worse than visiting Nightmare Armour's website and having a look into the store section. There you can fit yourself up with the coolest gear known to man: an exact replica of the Master Chief's *Halo* armour for just $3,500. Go here right now: www.nightmarearmor.com/halo_store.html

FLIGHT TERROR

It's not just *HL2* hackers who need worry about a thump on the door. Julie Olearcek found herself at the mercy of the cops when she bought *Microsoft Flight Simulator* for her ten year-old son in a store in Massachusetts. The store clerk was so alarmed at the prospect of a kid taking charge of a plane, he reported the sale to the police and Julie found herself under investigation. At this rate it won't be long before Mr Gates has to get 'the right to bear *MS Flight Sim*' inserted into the American constitution.

THE SPY

BEWARE, PC OWNERS. THE NEXT TIME YOUR DOORBELL RINGS, IT COULD BE THE FEDS.

ILLUSTRATION DAVID LYTTLETON

While various organisations here are looking to find ways to stamp down on file-sharing, the Recording Industry Association of America is actually stamping down doors – and issuing subpoenas. The war against piracy is getting deadly serious. Big business means... business. The scary thing is, their weapon of choice is a juggernaut legal system that favours the moneyed, shoots first, and asks questions later.

In early January, an American PC gamer was woken up by an insistent knocking at the door. He stumbled downstairs to be faced with a group of FBI agents, who then produced a warrant, entered his house, turned the place inside out and walked out carrying armfuls of computer and electronic equipment. It seems he was targeted as a suspect in the theft of the *Half-Life 2* source code.

The gentleman in question, who vigorously protests his innocence, was part of an open-source programmers' collective known as the Hungry Programmers and, as it transpired, several of their houses were raided simultaneously. If you're interested in reading the full and shocking tale, Spy recommends you check out the chap's blog at http://squeedlyspooch.com/blog/archives/000072.html.

Rather more pleasing is the tiny blip on The Spy's radar that reveals a *Call of Duty* expansion is on the way. It has certainly appeared on retailers' release schedules, and is slated to hit the shelves sometime in the autumn. With any luck, it'll continue in the original's vein of quality, adventurous gaming, and not fall into the lazy habit of repetition that the *Medal of Honour* series has become victim of. Continuing in the vein of unannounced-but-in-the-pipeline games, The Spy's LucasArts informers let the monkey out of the bag: there is, apparently, a fifth *Monkey Island* game in production. The adventure genre continues to cheat death, although it's got a weak pulse in today's market.

Meanwhile, one well-placed bug was all it took The Spy to learn that, despite Epic's initial plans to co-ordinate the two games so players of both could meet online, *Unreal Tournament 2004* won't actually offer backwards compatibility with *Unreal Tournament 2003*. Apparently, the network code has evolved so much from the *UT2003* days that the two just won't work together. An inevitable shame, perhaps, but the prospect of an 'evolved network code' *UT2004* takes the edge off the disappointment somewhat.

And finally, The Spy can at last pull the lid off *SimCity 5*. Luc Barthelet, General Manager at Maxis, recently spilt a bean or two about this on a French TV show (The Spy's eyes really are everywhere), but since then Maxis have remained tight-lipped, refusing to either confirm or deny the existence of the game. As it turns out, EA are now looking for a new Art Director to work on "The next generation of *SimCity*". Hah. It would now appear to be more a matter of 'when' rather than 'if'. Spy out.

"He was targeted as a suspect in the theft of the *Half-Life 2* code"

THE OFFICIAL PC GAMES addict TOP TEN

1	(1)	The Sims Deluxe	EA
2	(3)	The Sims: Superstar	EA
3	(4)	The Sims: Unleashed	EA
4	(7)	Call of Duty	Activision
5	(3)	The Sims: Makin' Magic	EA
6	NE	Sim City 4 Deluxe	EA
7	(8)	Need For Speed: Underground	EA
8	NE	Nemo Underwater World Fun	THQ
9	(5)	The Sims: Vacation	EA
10	NE	NWN: Hordes of the Underdark	Atari

Charts compiled by Inform (www.informbd.com.au)

inform

Charts can be viewed at **www.informbd.com.au** *as part of Inform's comprehensive database of online market intelligence, updated weekly*

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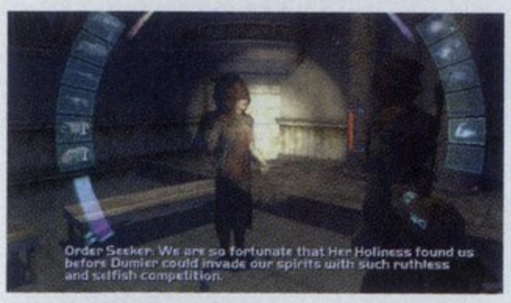
PC GAMES addict RECOMMENDED

SUMMER'S HERE, BUT PLAYING THESE GAMES IS MUCH MORE FUN THAN WEARING SPEEDOS.


Order Seeker: We are so fortunate that Her Holiness found us before Dumier could invade our spirits with such ruthless and selfish competition.

Deus Ex: Invisible War

91%

Possibly not as earth-shattering as its predecessor which crossed genres as often as coke dealers cross the border (or so movies lead us to believe). The real key-phrase here is 'non-linear'. A sci-fi schooter with RPG bits, your way. Tops!

Star Wars: KotOR

92%

From the makers of *Neverwinter Knights* and *Baldur's Gate* comes this, Bioware's most accessible RPG to date. It's a fully 3D, epic scale story of down-fall, retribution and redemption, set in the *Star Wars* universe some 4,000 years BC – Before Chewbacca.

Halo: Combat Evolved

91%

The subtitle gives the game away; it's pure science fiction combat, with the flab and fat of first-person action stripped away, leaving raw violence and a fantastic atmosphere. The multi-player is all-consuming, swallowing days with its crazy fun.

Call of Duty

91%

If *Medal of Honour* demonstrated what WWII games could be capable of, *Call of Duty* is the realisation of that promise. The extravagant battle scenes are cinema squared. It's the new red-flag bearer of first-person shooters, and essential.

DONE WHEN IT'S DONE

Key to charts New entry this month ● *Sounds about right to us* ● *Are you really sure about that?* ● *Yeah, right. Dream on, buddy.*

GAME NAME	PUBLISHER	LATEST RELEASE DATE	
Age of Empires 3	Microsoft	TBA	
Beyond Divinity	CDV	Autumn 2004	●
Black & White 2	Electronic Arts	Spring 2004	●
BloodRayne 2	Vivendi	TBA	●
Bloody Waters: Terror from the Deep	TBA	TBA	
Breed	CDV	March 2004	●
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	TBA	2004	●
Close Combat: Afrika Korps	GMX	TBA	●
Codename: Panzers	CDV	Autumn 2004	●
Colin McRae Rally 4.0	Codemasters	April 2004	●
Conan	TDK	Autumn 2004	●
Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars	CDV	Autumn 2004	●
Deus Ex: Invisible War	Eidos	March 2004	●
Deus Ex 3	Eidos	TBA	
Doom III	Activision	May 2004	●
Duke Nukem Forever	Rockstar	2004	●
Dungeon Siege 2	Microsoft	2004	●
Dungeons & Dragons Online	Atari	2005	●
Drake	Vivendi	March 2004	●
Driver 3	Atari	Winter 2004	●
Everquest II	Ubi Soft	June 2004	●
Evil Genius	Vivendi	March 2004	●
Far Cry	Ubi Soft	Autumn 2004	●
Freedom Force vs The Third Reich	TBA	Autumn 2004	●
Full Spectrum Warrior	THQ	Winter 2004	●
Ground Control 2	Vivendi	March 2004	●
Half-Life 2	Vivendi	May 2004	●
Hidden & Dangerous 3	Take Two	TBA	
Hitman: Contracts	Eidos	2004	●
IL-2 Sturmovik Expansion	Ubi Soft	March 2004	●
Jagged Alliance 2: Wildfire	Strategy First	Autumn 2004	●
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising	Novalogic	June 2004	●
Kill Bill	Vivendi	2005	●
Kingdom Under Fire: Crusaders	Phantagram	TBA	●
Knightshift	Koch	March 2004	●
March! Off-World Recon	Oxygen	March 2004	●
Medal of Honour: Pacific Assault	Electronic Arts	April 2004	●
Men of Valour: Vietnam	Vivendi	Spring 2004	●
Middle-Earth Online	Vivendi	2004	●
Operation Flashpoint 2	Codemasters	2005	●
Panzers	CDV	Summer 2004	●
Perimeter	Codemasters	2004	●
Pirates!	Atari	2004	●
Quake IV	Activision	Christmas 2004	●
Race Driver 2: Ultimate Racing Simulator	Codemasters	Winter 2004	●
Restricted Area	4am	April 2004	●
Richard Burns Rally	SCi	May 2004	●
Rise of Nations: Thrones and Patriots	Microsoft	Autumn 2004	●
Rome: Total War	Activision	Spring 2004	●
Sacred	Koch	2004	●
Sam & Max 2	Activision	March 2004	●
Settlers Of Catan	Capcom	2004	●
Silent Hill 4: The Room	Konami	2004	●
Sniper Elite	Wanadoo	Autumn 2004	●
Soldiers	Codemasters	Winter 2004	●
Soldner: Secret Wars	Bigben	March 2004	●
Spells of Gold	Oxygen	Autumn 2004	●
Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow	Ubi Soft	March 2004	●
S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Oblivion Lost	THQ	Winter 2004	●
Starship Troopers	Empire	Christmas 2004	●
Star Wars: Battlefront	LucasArts	Spring 2004	●
Star Wars: Republic Commando	Activision	Winter 2004	●
Supremecy: Four Paths To Power	Strategy First	Autumn 2004	●
Team Fortress 2	Vivendi	TBA	●
The Bard's Tale	Acclaim	October 2004	●
The Longest Journey 2	Funcom	TBA	●
The Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle Earth	Electronic Arts	Winter 2004	●
The Lord of the Rings: Middle-Earth Online	Vivendi	Summer 2004	●
The Matrix Online	Atari	Spring 2004	●
The Movies	Activision	2004	●
The Playboy Mansion	Ubi Soft	TBA	●
The Sims 2	Electronic Arts	Autumn 2004	●
Thief	Eidos	2004	●
Tribes Vengeance	Vivendi	Late 2004	●
Total Annihilation 2	Phantagram	Autumn 2004	●
Two Thrones	Strategy First	2004	●
Unreal Tournament 2004	Atari	March 2004	●
Unreal Warfare	Atari	TBA	●
Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines	Activision	Autumn 2004	●
Warhammer Online	Sega	Autumn 2004	●
World of Warcraft	Vivendi	December 2004	●
X2: Online Universe	Koch	Spring 2004	●

SPECIAL NEWS REPORT

GRAPHICS

GRAPHICS 1971-2004 REST IN PC

Graphics today are better than ever. So why isn't our excitement about them at an all time high? We get violent on graphics.

By KIERON GILLEN

Games developer conferences are many things. Often intriguing. Often illuminating. Often – though perhaps not often enough – outspoken. And often about better ways to get pixel shader effects even shadier. But it's rarely as out-and-out controversial as Jason Rubin's keynote address in Europe this year: "Great Game Graphics... Who Cares?"

If you rely purely on your PC for your gaming pleasure, you're unlikely to know much about Jason Rubin, or the company he heads, Naughty Dog. They're responsible for the entire series of *Crash Bandicoot* games on the PlayStation and, recently *Jak and Dexter* on the PS2. They've sold 25 million copies, which explains the lovely tan Mr Rubin possesses. Their secret – and I paraphrase him directly – is that they made sure that their games were better looking, by far, than the nearest competition while ensuring their games were *just* entertaining enough: great graphics plus a reasonable enough game. This led to the aforementioned mega sales. While the original *Jak and Daxter* was hardly a failure, it didn't break the three million boundary, despite being one of the most technically impressive games of its type. From this, Jason has elaborated an argument that graphics alone won't be enough to sell a game anymore. He posits two other things that can sell a game – association or novelty. That is, licences, or new stuff. The day of Great Game Graphics has passed.

You might shrug, thinking that he's extrapolating his own experience to a general rule. Obviously graphics are going to continue getting better and better. Nevertheless, there's something worryingly convincing about Rubin's argument. He doesn't claim that graphics aren't going to improve – it's whether anyone will *care*. While this may not have such a serious impact on consoles, it's a different story for the PC. Consoles have five-year cycles: limited advances within their own lifespan, but an enormous leap in graphical fidelity every time ConsoleToyNext is released. The PC, however, has rolling improvements, month on month, and this has a dampening effect on our expectations. Day by day almost, 3D card manufacturers release new cards promising graphics that will liquidise your eyes and make them drool from your sockets. But – be honest now – since when has this been true?

To take a recent experience: during the final days of Steam I found myself playing the original *Half-life*. And, frankly, it looked perfectly acceptable. While it clearly lacks the fine polish of modern first-person shooters, the world it presented me with was entirely comparable with anything around. And, being a great game in the first place, it was more enjoyable than – say – *Unreal II*. However, if you went back to 1998 when Valve's masterpiece was released, and attempted to play a game five years older than *that*, it would be a very different experience. To go back and play *System Shock*, *Doom* or *Wolfenstein* requires a whole re-arrangement of your thought processes to accept the difference in graphics quality.

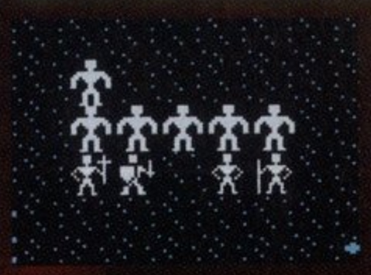
"As we approach perfection, it becomes more elusive..."

This is key to Rubin's argument. The amount of graphical power used in a game often bears little relation to how much the gamer will enjoy it. Consider the leap from *Space Invaders* to *Super Mario*. The technological increase is relatively small, a few more colours and greater definition. However, in terms of the difference in experience it's a huge leap. Instead of blank adversaries, you're now playing with characters you can have an emotional response to. Conversely, consider the jump in power between the PlayStation 1 and PlayStation 2. According to the raw numbers, the latter is several hundred times more powerful. Is it offering an experience that's several hundred times better? No, because the fundamentals haven't changed since the leap from the 16-bit consoles to the PlayStation, from flat characters to a 3D world and a sense of place. It's still a leap, but a relatively restrained one – and thus while attractive to people, it's not what you'd call irresistibly exciting.

On the PC side, consider the performance advance between a 3D card of a few years ago and one of today. Ignoring everything else the card does, and the increases in the supporting PC architecture, and purely looking at how many MegaPixels it throws around every second, examine the difference between the TNT2, which managed 230, and the ATI Radeon 9800 Pro, which shifts 3040. That's 13 times more power there alone. Are you getting 13 times more pleasure from your 3D card? Almost certainly not. In fact, the real leap in the PC was from the days before 3D cards to the days after 3D cards. The difference afterwards has been, in the general scale of things, minor. Attractive, yes, but still minor. While the next 3D cards will offer beautiful shiny hair, that's hardly the same order of excitement as being dropped into an alien world for the very first time.

Look at the state of Great Graphics in the

Evolution of the orc



1983 ***Ultima III*** To be honest, we're not even sure if any of these fellows *are* orcs. We just wouldn't know. Trolls, maybe? Giants? Still, great game.

1990 ***Eye of the Beholder*** Probably kobolds, but distinctly goblinoid. A couple of frames of attack animation in the square-hop-motion first-person dungeon delving.

1992 ***Lure of the Temptress*** Revolution's first graphic adventure, the Skalds are clearly an Orc analogue. And a pretty graphic adventure version for the time.

1992 ***Ultima Underworld*** The team who would become Looking Glass software break through into another dimension. The third. There, waiting, they find orcs.

R.I.P.

movies, and you get a sense of both videogaming's own future and a fine counter-argument against those who think graphics *can* improve and drive games. While Pixar's Toy Story managed to attract some of its audience purely through its groundbreaking technical merits, with people leaving amazed at what those new-fangled computers could do, the even-more-attractive Monsters Inc aroused much less comment. With Finding Nemo, it has almost disappeared. People are going to these films because of the story now, not the technology which allows the story to be told.

It's also noticeable that as we approach perfection, it becomes more elusive. Take Matrix Reloaded: people were disappointed that they could "tell some bits were computer generated". You wonder whether back in 1933 audiences stomped out of King Kong moaning "that was no Giant Ape! That was a big old puppet!" They didn't, of course. The difference being that back then such special effects were unprecedented. These days they're old news, and the slightest little failings break the illusion. There's a ceiling, and movie graphics have hit it.

With games, the graphics ceiling differs in every genre. In some, it's clear that we've reached it. With accurate motion-captured movement, realistic settings and player features already the norm for sports sims, how will *FIFA 2015* be any different from what we're playing now? Mud sticking to people's legs? Pupils dilating when they look in the sun? Reflective referee whistles? First-person shooters are also dangerously near to the effective maximum – after *Doom III* and *Half-Life 2*, how much actual use will further graphical excess be in advancing the genre? The humble real-time strategy game, on the other hand, is about to take a genuine leap forward with *Rome: Total War*. Freeform, expansive games like *Grand Theft Auto* also have room to expand. And massively-multi-player games have a distinctly long way to go. Developers working in these areas can perhaps still make their living through releasing games with better graphics alone.

However, there's another problem. Not only are good game graphics getting less impressive, they're getting easier to implement. Jason Rubin talks about the early days of *Crash Bandicoot* on the PlayStation, where most developers could get about 1,000 polygons on screen and if they really worked at it, nearer 3,000. 1,000 polys wasn't enough for a convincing third-person action game, thus it was *necessary* for a developer to be good at graphics to make a game. Fast forward a few years and assume the 'third' rule holds true. Even if you don't work at it you can now get 50,000 polygons on screen, and if you do work at it you'll get 150,000. 50,000 is enough, by far, for any game. While there's a visible difference, it's only surface polish. Fast forward again, and it's 500,000 polys if you're lazy, 1.5 million if you're not. And it's unlikely that any but the most eagle-eyed would spot the difference. And this isn't even taking into consideration the phenomenon of off-the-peg 3D engines, which allow games as remedial as *Devastation* to look almost as attractive as *Unreal 2* or *Invisible War*.

Selling a game through graphics alone is still possible. If you could, for example, make the leap from current standards to photorealism with a single graphics card and an associated game, you can guarantee a large roll of cash heading your way. But that's not the way it's going to happen. We're going to arrive there in tiny steps. To steal the horrible phrase of lazy developers and journalists everywhere, we're going to approach visual perfection through evolution rather than revolution. And while revolutions make the front page across the world, evolution is so slow as to be invisible. And that doesn't excite anyone.

This brings me back to my earlier point: the problem is going to be worse for the PC than for consoles. With those leaps forward every five years, there are archipelagos of graphical excitement ahead in console land. With the PC, and its steady progress, we're not even going to get that. In fact, it's entirely possible that the coming months offer the last genuine leap in graphical performance we'll see for some time. For the last three years, the *Quake III* engine has been standard for the PC action world, and now *Doom III* and *Half-Life 2* look to offer the first radical advance on that. It'll be a leap of sorts. And it will be impressive, in its own way. But the days when graphics ruled videogames are rapidly drawing to a close.

How the greenest of our perpetual foes has changed over the ages.

1996 ***Daggerfall***
Fast forward a few years, and while more detailed and animated, there's the same flat look to orcs. Someone make a 3D orc card, quickly.

1999 ***Ultima IX: Ascension***
Well, it's a wingless Gargoyle, but it'll have to do. It's a solid 3D model rather than a flat sprite, so well done anyway. Quite orcish. But pink, clearly.

2001 ***Severance: Blade of Darkness***
Even more orcy, but not quite the huge leap from *Daggerfall* to *Ultima IX*, let alone *Lure of the Temptress* to *Ultima Underworld*.

2002 ***Morrowind 2002***
Daggerfall's sequel catches up with those elusive 3D cards, and puts 3D orcs in a 3D world and – er – makes them go shopping in a huge landscape.

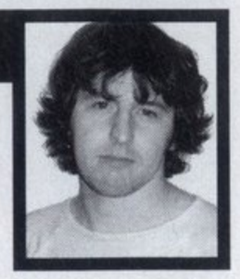
2004 ***Warhammer***
What does the future hold for orcs? We hazard a guess of increased texture mapped green and bump-masked tusks. Or similar.

THIS MONTH IN GAMES

WELCOME TO OUR GENRE-SPECIFIC NEWS SECTION, FEATURING ALL THE MONTH'S HIGHLIGHTS. DIGEST, THEN FIRE US OFF AN EMAIL TO **pcga@derwenthoward.com.au** TO HAVE YOUR SAY.

THE MONTH IN FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS

■ Craig Pearson



'THE door was opened! Your horror waits for you,' proclaims the blurb. It can only mean one thing. Yup, a Hell-on-Earth FPS, with zombies, SMGs and a blatant disregard for any innocent bystanders. *Hellforce* is a Russian-developed shooter in the style of classic spray-'em-dead-with-lots-of-lead games of yore. Think *Doom*, with go-faster stripes and an arsenal that Arsene Wenger would fear. Saying anything about the plot would be an exercise in futility, as all it amounts to is an excuse for lots of gore, jet-black humour and mad, bullet-happy action, but that's never a bad thing as far as I'm concerned. You can get your hands on this satanic conspiracy this winter.

"THINK *DOOM*, WITH GO-FASTER STRIPES AND AN ARSENAL ARSENE WENGER WOULD FEAR."

The best mappers from the wondrous *Day of Defeat* mod have begun work on another war-themed FPS. *Greenlight: Airborne Operations 1939-45*, is MMO strategic shooter. You're part of an elite paratrooper unit that fights behind enemy lines in the most dangerous, knife-edge situations possible. Based on the Torque engine (of *Tribes* fame), it's standalone and utterly free. Missions take you to Crete, Sicily, Normandy, Operation Market Garden and the Battle of the Bulge. Tanks and other vehicles are supported, and they're setting up maps for up to 128 players. Definitely one we'll be keeping a close eye on.

Apparently, *Half-Life 2* is on sale in Russia. They're taken the leaked alpha, rejigged it, translated the text into Russian and put it on sale. Poor old leaky Valve.

Further Links

www.orion-mm.ru/hell/en/index.htm
■ Take a Trip to Hull. Sorry, to Hell.
www.invasionworks.com/gl_betapp.php
■ Beta sign-up thingy.

THE MONTH IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

■ Ross Atherton

JUST why are so few RPGs set in anything other than a time of darkness, complete with disastrous hordes of goblins and large-breasted elven ladies? Do RPG developers really get out so rarely that they couldn't make a real-world game if they tried? Help is at hand in the form of the *D20 Modern* mod for *Neverwinter Nights* (pictured). This hak pack (a collection of tilesets, textures and models) provides materials for module designers to create modern and mildly futuristic settings for adventures. It's still at an early beta stage, but there's a download available.

"SOMETIMES DEVELOPERS GRADUALLY DIE OF STARVATION IN DRAUGHTY APARTMENTS..."

It seems that every other new game we hear about is being developed in Russia or one of the other ex-Soviet states. Sometimes they get picked up by European or US publishers, and sometimes they never see the light of day outside the snowy borders of their homelands, and their developers gradually die of starvation in draughty apartments. We hope that won't be the case with *Metalheart: Replicants Rampage*, a cyberpunk isometric RPG which entices us with the promise that "You will never be able to defeat your enemies, because... you and your people are only HUMAN". Er – OK. Your party of six is recruited from mutants, nomads, cyborgs and replicants, and much is made of the high-tech weaponry and particularly the biotech implants which boost your combat abilities. The game itself doesn't look quite so high-tech but there's a lot of love for this kind of setting. Even if it doesn't feature large-breasted elven ladies.

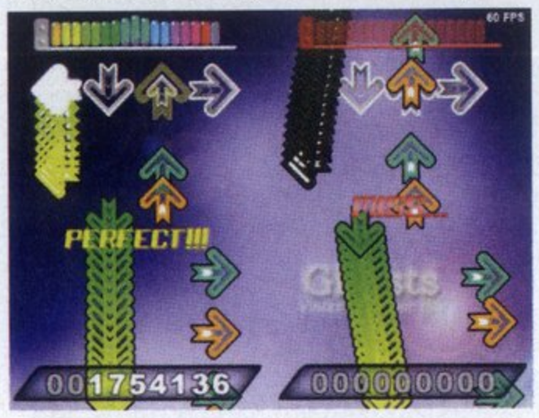
Further Links

http://d20.gravemistakes.com
■ Breaking the *Neverwinter* mould.
www.metalheart.ru
■ No goblins here either.

THE MONTH IN ACTION-ADVENTURE GAMES

■ Tim Edwards

WHILE a couple of PC publishers have been jumping (to the left, to the right, up and down and all right) onto the dancemat bandwagon, it's heartening to know that the amateur development scene is already on the case. *Stepmania* (pictured) is an open-source dance game, built by bored, ultra-fit programmers from all over the world. What elevates it above the competition is one astounding feature: the ability to import and dance to your own songs and rhythm patterns. If you've got a healthy mp3 collection you should be able to find dance patterns written by enthusiasts to fit. If you can't, this might be the spark you need to consider learning a coding language – Open Source programming thrives when the little guy sits up and realises he can make a contribution. But you'll need to dig up a compatible dance mat: your best bet is to pick up a cheap PlayStation mat and a USB-to-PlayStation converter.



"A GAME BUILT BY BORED, ULTRA-FIT PROGRAMMERS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD."

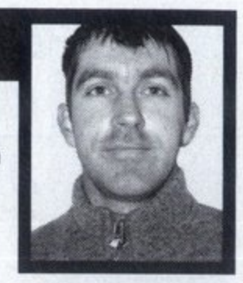
On a more traditional Action-Adventure tip, the first *Max Payne 2* tweaks are starting to filter through. There's nothing out there to match the awesome *Kung Fu* mod for the original yet, but give it a couple of months. Right now, the pick of the mods has to be *Cinema* (which tweaks the animations and adds various texture packs) while the best level out there is *Chateau*, a Dead Man Walking map that will have you popping prescription painkillers like Smarties.

Further Links

www.stepmania.com
■ Disco goes digital. Everything you need to start a gaming fitness regime.
www.paynereactor.com
■ Your first stop for *Max Payne* goodies. Keep an eye on their mod listings.

THE MONTH IN SIMULATION GAMES

■ Tim Stone



ON the good ship PC Games Addict, the disturbing sight of Yours Truly dressed in a flowery frock and long blonde wig, loitering nervously near the lifeboats, is a sure sign that a new U-boat sim has been spotted on the horizon.

On this occasion the sim is the recently announced sequel to the rather scurvy *Silent Hunter II*. Currently under construction in a country that is to real-life submarine warfare what Belgium is to bullfighting (Romania), it will hopefully avoid the development dislocation that torpedoed its predecessor, and provide the patient PC wolf pack with a compelling reason to *finally* decommission *Aces of the Deep* (Dynamix, 1993). And talking of the wonderful *AotD* let's pray there's a copy of it floating round Ubi Soft's Bucharest studio, if only to remind the *Silent Hunter 3* developers just how important good AI and a dynamic campaign are to any title that wants to capture the essence of the WWII U-boat experience. 3D interiors, virtual shipmates and a detailed crew management dimension all sound very promising, but if convoy escort behaviour isn't convincing, and campaigns end up as nothing but sequences of short scripted scenarios then – come Christmas – there will be a lot of curses from a lot of crestfallen kapitans.

"THE DISTURBING SIGHT OF YOURS TRULY IN A FLOWERY FROCK AND LONG BLONDE WIG..."

On a less speculative note, two of last year's more slovenly sims – *LOMAC* and *Strike Fighters* – pulled their windsocks up this month with the release of powerful patches.

Further Links

uboat.net
■ Not an anti-submarine measure.
www.majorleesaerodrome.net
■ *Strike Fighters* supplements.

THE MONTH IN MULTI-PLAYER/ONLINE GAMES

■ Mark Sutherns

IT'S hard to be upbeat about online gaming since the shambolic Cyber X Games debacle, but I'll have a go. At least Valve took time out from ducking the rotten tomatoes to release a significant *Counter-Strike* update. Clearly attempting to introduce *CS* to a wider spectator audience, they've done away with the round timer once the bomb is planted and reduced incentives for players to sit things out until timeout. Nice ideas, let's just hope we get to see the benefits at the next 'organised' event.

Talking of new ideas, the *PlanetSide* team seem to have been having them in spades. Aside from a long list of promised *Core Combat* enhancements, there's also talk of much-needed end battles, raging over capitol buildings to ultimately decide the balance of power on each continent. Protected by vast defensive shields, these dominions promise to play host to the biggest battles that the game world of Auraxis has ever seen. Time to re-activate that account, maybe.

"THESE DOMINIONS COULD PLAY HOST TO THE BIGGEST BATTLES *PLANETSIDE* HAS EVER SEEN."

It's *World of Warcraft* that's really got my temples pulsing with anticipation however, particularly with the public beta now imminent. That may well have kicked off by the time you read this – but it seems some shady characters just couldn't wait. Blizzard have become the latest victims of cyber-terrorism, with almost unplayable *WoW* alpha code finding its way onto the web. I'd rather wait for the real thing, if it's all the same with the script kiddies.

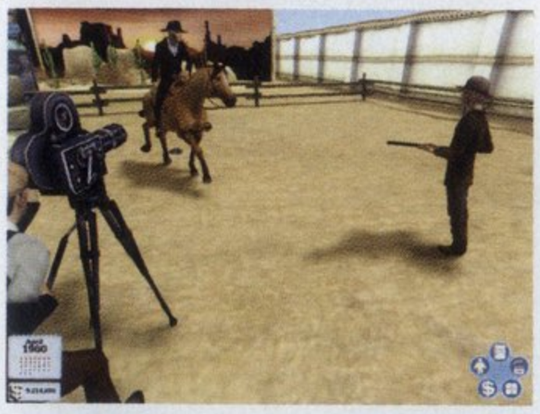
Further Links

www.clanrecruiter.net
■ Find yourself some online buddies to shoot guns with.
www.teamamdgamer.net
■ Follow TAG every step of the way.

THE MONTH IN STRATEGY GAMES

■ Mark Donald

MOO! Something furry this way comes. It seems that *Black & White 2* might actually fly the coop this year after all, as Lionhead glue on the manes and dot the leopardskins in time for a Christmas release. Sadly, the same can't be said of *The Movies*... Don't get your hopes up for seeing it sooner than winter 2005.



If you're looking for something a little more imminent, then click over to Strategy First's site, where they've just opened beta testing for their new multi-player political strategy title *Supreme Ruler 2010*. The game features optional real-time or turn-based modes, so there's something here for everybody. Check out www.strategyfirst.com/beta but don't hang around, as sign-up numbers (and server space) are limited.

"FOR WANT OF A BETTER DESCRIPTION, IT'S AN AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN SIM."

Continuing the political theme, there's campaign-trailing and public baby-kissing on the cards courtesy of Stardock's *The Political Machine*. For want of a better description, it's an American presidential campaign simulator, embracing all aspects of the sordid affair. Open beta begins mid-March, so if you fancy yourself as a budding Bush, check out www.the politicalmachine.com and get politicking.

I've also been having a tinker with *Afrika Korps vs Desert Rats*, the WWII squad-level RTS. Missions are tackled with limited forces, which means making the most of the terrain and any other vehicles you can scavenge in the field. Definitely one to watch.

Further Links

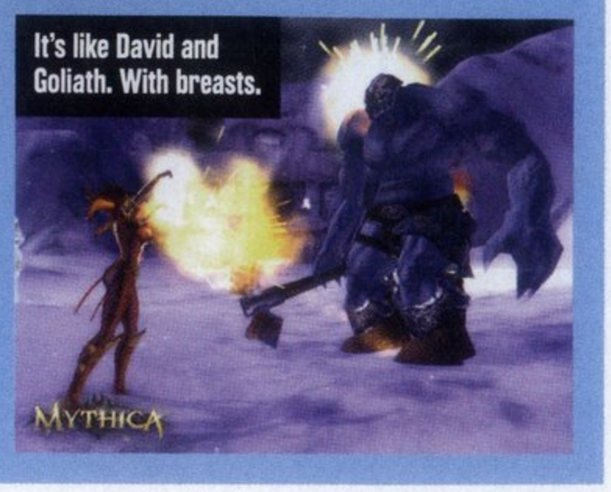
www.stormcloudcreations.com
■ Download demos for all Storm Cloud's games here, including *Interstellar Trader 2*.
www.lavamind.com/pro.html
■ Unorthodox fantasy-based economic management sims. Worth a look.

THE INSIDER

MAYBE IT WAS JUST AN INNOCENT MYTHSTAKE?

Warner Brothers surprised a lot of people this month by backing their media juggernaut neatly into the parking spot reserved for gaming publishers. Or in less flowery words, they've formed their own Interactive Entertainment division. Previously, Warner had been happy to sit back and watch Electronic Arts and Atari turn their valuable licences into games, but now, no doubt encouraged by the financial success of such titles as *Enter The Matrix*, it seems they've decided to grab the udders and milk the cash cows themselves. They're certainly taking things seriously, headhunting Jason Hall, CEO of Monolith Productions (*Halo*, *The Matrix Online*) and installing him as Senior Vice President. He's probably practising his putting on his plush new office carpet right now.

And finally... Insider just wouldn't be the same without a good old-fashioned lawsuit. MMORPG-makers Mythic Entertainment (*Dark Age of Camelot*), are taking on the mighty Microsoft in the US courts. The bone of contention being Microsoft's forthcoming MMO *Mythica*, which Mythic are concerned is too similar to their company's registered name. "We cannot allow Microsoft to usurp our rights, confuse the public and use the Mythic brand to gain an unfair competitive advantage," said a vexed Mark Jacobs, Mythic's CEO.



COLIN MCRAE RALLY 04

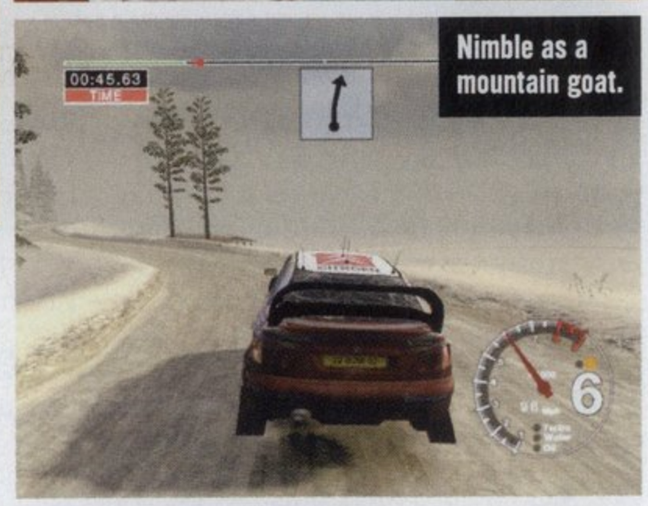
The hippies were wrong: the trees are definitely *not* your friends.

By AL BICKHAM

The sense of chassis-roll is palpable, especially when you're walking that gossamer-fine line between grip and slip.

Woohoo, watch them sparks fly! My wife's going to kill me.

360° spins are dangerously easy to perform.



Nimble as a mountain goat.

COLIN MCRAE 04 AT A GLANCE

Publisher: Codemasters

Developer: In-house

Genre: Rally

Estimated Minimum System: PIII 800, 256Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card

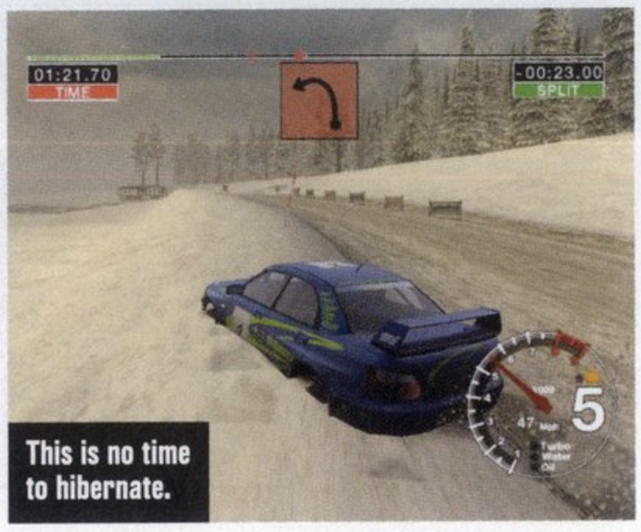
Contact: www.codemasters.com/colinmcrae04

Release Date: April/May 2004

What's in it for you? Whiplash, broken femurs, sprained wrists and runny food.

BELTING down the rural dirt tracks and flinty forest paths of *Colin McRae Rally 04*, something becomes immediately and painfully apparent: nature hates you. It *wants* you to screw up. It despises the touch of your wheels, and bucks you at every opportunity. It wants you to hit that tree head on and cough your brains all over the track, like some spongy grey trap for the next driver. Perhaps if I join an eco-charity, nature will be nicer to me... do you think?

This perversely wonderful sensation is a reflection of just how uneven the surface beneath your wheels is. Codemasters have managed to blend the general effect of a road surface (ice, gravel, sand etc) with the minutiae of imperfection any such surface boasts. You don't just skid around on muddy forest floors; you hit countless little stones, rocks, potholes and inclines that constantly punch your steering off just enough to keep you fighting the controls at all times. Add in the compensations you need to make for camber, the mapping out in your mind's eye of the next couple of corners as described by your co-driver's pace notes, and suddenly your brain's working harder and faster than that raging P4 processor in your PC. If only you could get heatsinks and fans for the old grey matter. Make mine a Cooler Master...



This is no time to hibernate.

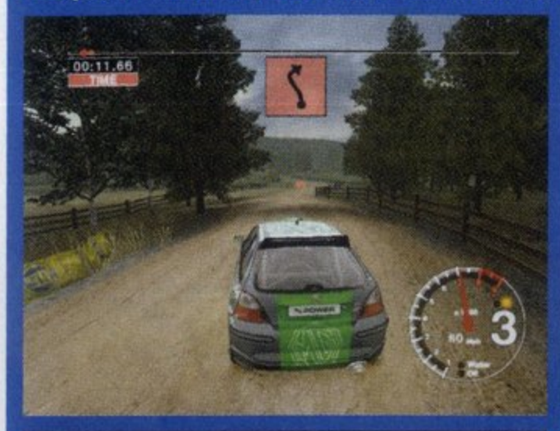
But thinking about it, you don't want the pressure taken off. You want it piled on in custard-thick wodges, for the intense levels of exciement generated. And even amid the furious kaleidoscope of decision-making, commitment and compensation such knife-edge driving demands, you can still find time to admire the scenery. DirectX 9 comes into its own here, as the lighting and reflection effects aren't just pretty – they capture a feeling. Racing through the English countryside on an oppressive, overcast day, we found ourselves ejected from the forest track and barrelling down a stretch of country road. Just as we turned a corner, the shiny hog's-back camber caught a fan of pink-gold rays as the sun struggled out from behind a cloud to cheer us on. It made our hearts sing. We then ploughed headlong into a dry-stone wall, and concertina-ed the bonnet. But it was worth every lost second.

The graphical details are excellent almost everywhere, and the sheer sense of location is another thing you feel on an emotional level. Winter-crisp blue skies peep through the canopy of the English forest; hard-baked orange earth hammers at your suspension our own Aussie outback; and the steel-grey skies and dirty ice of the wintry Swedish tracks remind you exactly why the country is so notorious for its high suicide rate.

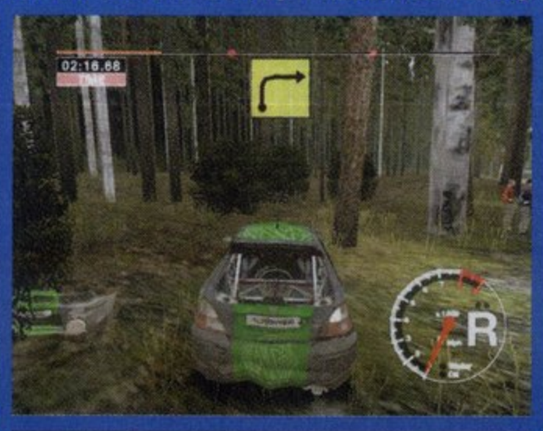
But it's not all roses. There are still a few areas where things just don't feel

SIX POINTS AND A FINE

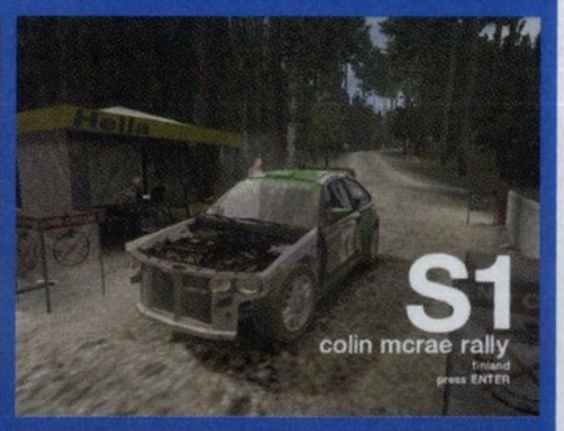
People like us really shouldn't be allowed on the roads. We're every insurance man's nightmare.



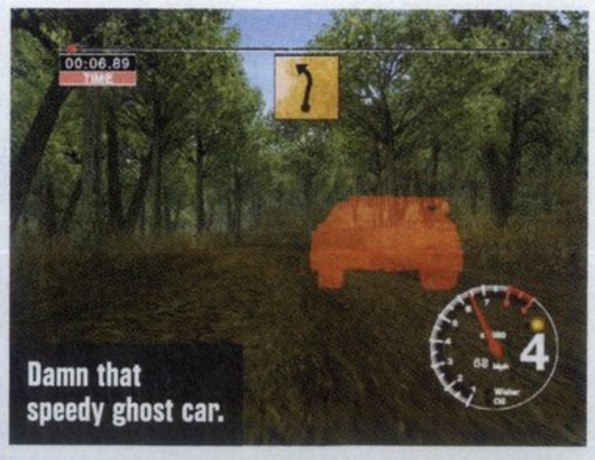
Things start off promisingly. Several hundred thousand pounds'-worth of high-spec rally car looks good on us.



Aiee!!! Tree! *TREE!* Crump, tinkle, etc. Despite the lost bonnet, we soldier on – like the professionals we are.



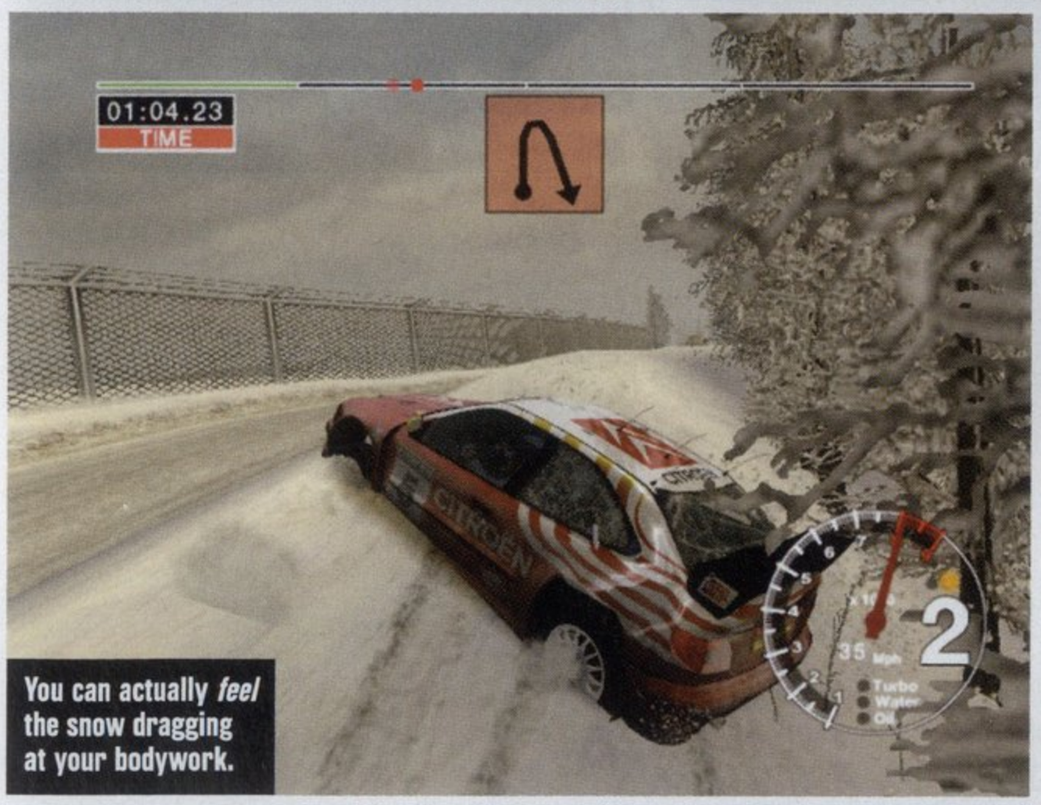
Engine guffing grey smoke, we debrief with the co-driver after a thoroughly gruelling stage. Now, where's that mechanic?



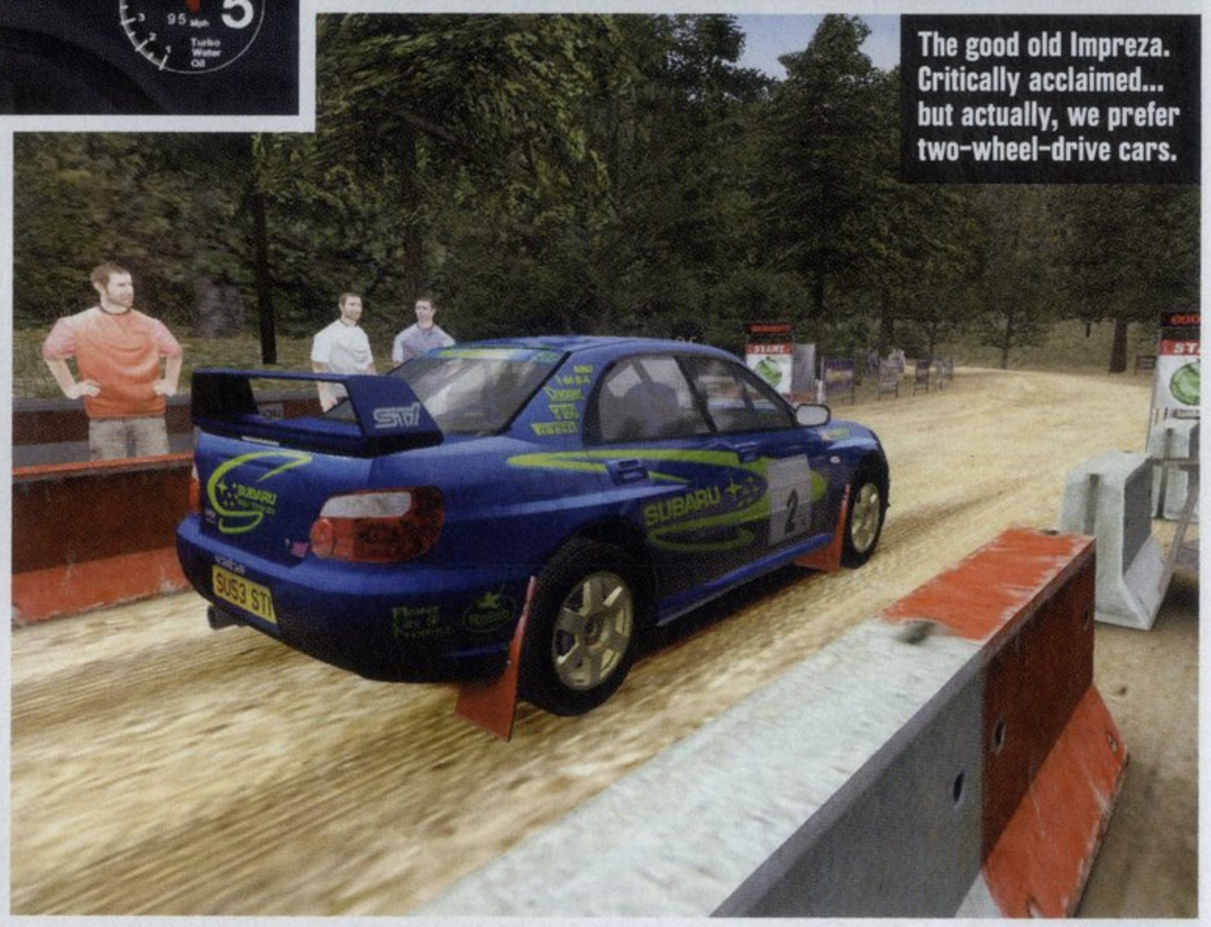
Damn that speedy ghost car.

Always give way to the right.

Smashing weather effects, too.



You can actually *feel* the snow dragging at your bodywork.



The good old Impreza. Critically acclaimed... but actually, we prefer two-wheel-drive cars.

quite right. Bushes slow you down rather than stopping you, which is great, but they're just simple cross-shaped cut-outs, which is not so great. And however good the guys standing around at the start and finish lines look, you still come across a few cardboard cutout folk watching from the sidelines – the kind of models that were once used to reduce the polygon count and keep the frame-rate up, and just aren't necessary anymore. Bit lazy that, and something of an illusion-breaker.

Utterly forgivable stuff, though, and there's still an awful lot here for rally fans. The sprawling two- and four-wheel drive championship modes offer periodic mini-games in which you test out experimental parts in the field. Perform well, and you'll get to keep them as permanent upgrades. There's also a custom mode, which allows you to tie together any tracks you've unlocked into a rally sequence of your own. And for completists, there's a group-B championship, in which you attack the tracks using classic rally cars of days gone by. Stacks to do then – and let's not forget the LAN/internet multi-player mode, which promises to be a whole ambulance-load of fun.

"HARD-BAKED ORANGE EARTH HAMMERS AT YOUR SUSPENSION IN THE AUSSIE OUTBACK..."

The damage and repair system adds an extra layer of challenge as, between rally stages, there's only so much time for your team to get the car fixed up properly. This means prioritising repair time. If you're a wheel down but your tracking's also a bit iffy, for example, obviously you'll plump for a new wheel, and hope to limp through the next stage with wonky steering. Like you'll need the extra hassle...

Short of a serious disaster at Codemasters HQ, we can't see how *Colin McRae 04* can fail. The early code we've played promises intense driving through some extremely well-detailed scenery, and it's simply made us hot for the finished article. Suffice it to say, it's coming along nicely. The only question that remains is, as a sequel, will there be enough in the way of new stuff here to warrant a purchase for *Colin McRae Rally 3* fans? Given the sublime level of detail applied to every aspect of the driving experience, and the palpable sense of environment, we suspect there will.

GEARS, STEERS AND CHEERS

The *Colin* series has always got steering just right, and the key difference between *04* and its predecessor is that it's even tougher. *Colin McRae Rally 3* employed what Codemasters dub a 'steering aid,' which essentially made the car move around a central pivot point. Now though, they've ditched it in favour of a more realistic approach, which means your car's pivot point changes according to inclination, tilt, acceleration, braking and a host of other variables.

EVERQUEST II

The end of a world is approaching. But it's OK, there'll be another one along in a minute.

BY TIM EDWARDS

Good to see extras from Jason and the Argonauts still gainfully employed.

Brother Bear: the Director's Cut.

Below: Glowing hands. Always a sure sign of a healthy outdoor adventurer.

EVER QUEST II AT A GLANCE

Publisher: Ubi Soft

Developer: Sony Online Entertainment

Genre: Massively multi-player RPG.

Estimated Minimum System: P4 1GHz, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card

Contact: everquest.station.sony.com

Release Date: January 2005

What's in it for you? The return of the MMORPG king.

"THIS is a public service broadcast for the citizens of Norrath: get out while you still can. Sony Online Entertainment have judged your world and found it wanting. Plans already exist for its destruction. Now is the time to begin your preparations for the apocalypse. You have been warned."

Oh, calm down. Sony aren't planning to shut down the original *EQ* servers any time soon. But it makes no sense to set *Everquest II* within the same conceptual world and timeframe as *EQI*, which has forced the developers to come up with an elegant plan for the sequel. Within the next five hundred years an unnamed and unexplained catastrophic event will occur, wiping out the population, destroying cities, tearing up land and flattening forests. That re-shaped Norrath is where your adventures within *Everquest II* will begin.

Chris Cao, one of *Everquest*'s many designers, explains the decision. "To have a sequel, you really need to have an end, and of course *Everquest* is nowhere near its end. So, that's why we've taken the 'what if' approach. What if Norrath and the world that you knew had somehow drastically changed? What if the gods had gone silent, and all these changes had taken place over 500 years? And now suddenly you have Norrath, and there's still these touchstones you remember: there are the cities of Freeport and Qeynos, but what if the context has changed. What does that mean to you and the all other players?"

It's those players that gave the original *Everquest* meaning. Since its launch, five years ago, half a million have passed through Norrath en route to adventure. 500,000 souls in one place, questing, talking, flirting and marrying online. It's a monstrous statistic, a number that makes you sit back, put your hands on the back of your neck and whistle through your teeth. Without that massive influx of explorers, keen to forge their own legend, *Everquest* the all-encompassing fantasy would have been *Everquest* the still-born. For *EQII* to match its success, it needs to create a world that lives up to the expectations of the same audience – which is causing a deity-sized headache for John Blakely, *Everquest II*'s senior producer.

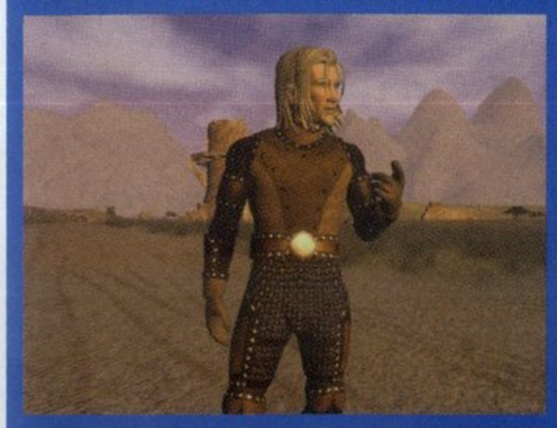
"Working on *Everquest II* is not so much a sense of power, but an enormous sense of responsibility. We're not about to make a game the way we want it, we have to make a game that people will enjoy. God didn't have to deal with players day in, day out. In *Everquest II* we want to make something that all our continuing subscribers will continue to enjoy."

Every single element within the new world of Norrath must be built to fit. "Imagine in the real world," says Blakely, "if someone had to build a city, before anyone lived there. He'd have to make sure there were plenty of places to buy everything you might need, and there were enough engineers and shopkeepers, and god knows what else. You have to do all that ahead of time, then unleash the population into it. That's exactly what we're doing."

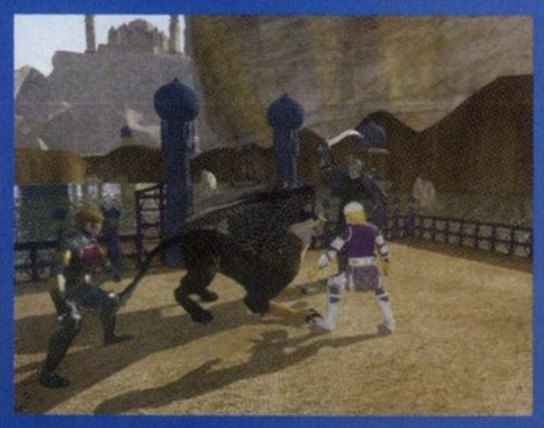
The logistics and scale of such an enterprise are daunting. As Blakely talks over an in-game demonstration, he explains just what the game is capable of. He starts by wandering around the starting town of Freeport, showing off the latest version of their graphics engine. Every texture, from

BEASTIARY BONUS

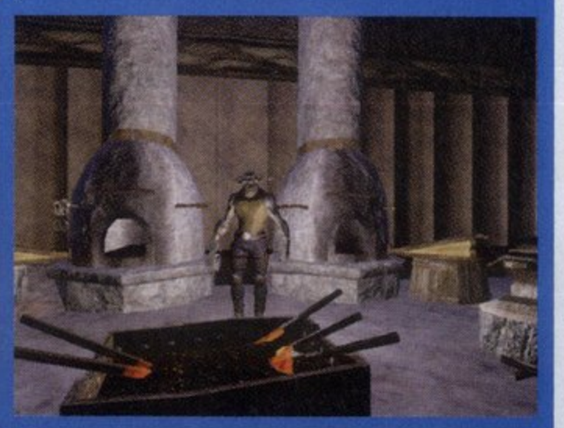
There's still room for some of the more traditional races within *EQII*'s fantasy meanderings.



The basic human template. Character creation for humans is easier as we have a strong understanding of their beauty...



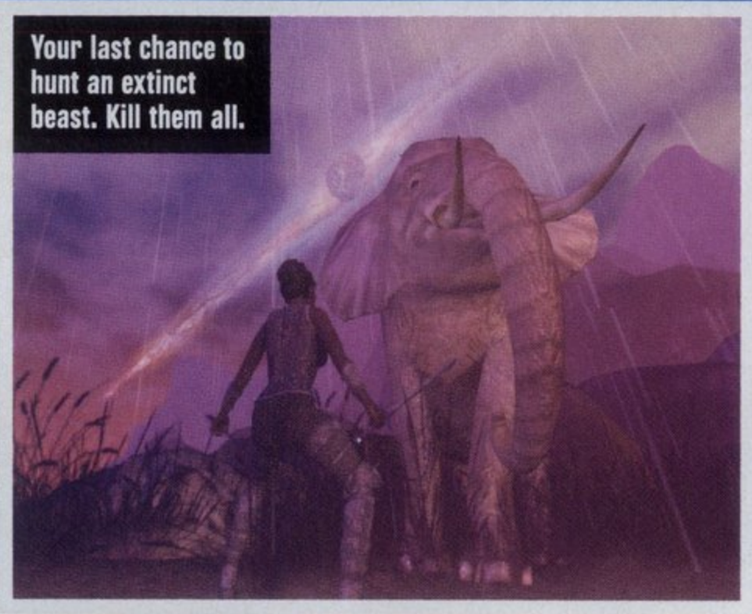
...but how do you define what makes a thing like this beautiful? Wing span? Size of talons? Or a nice personality?



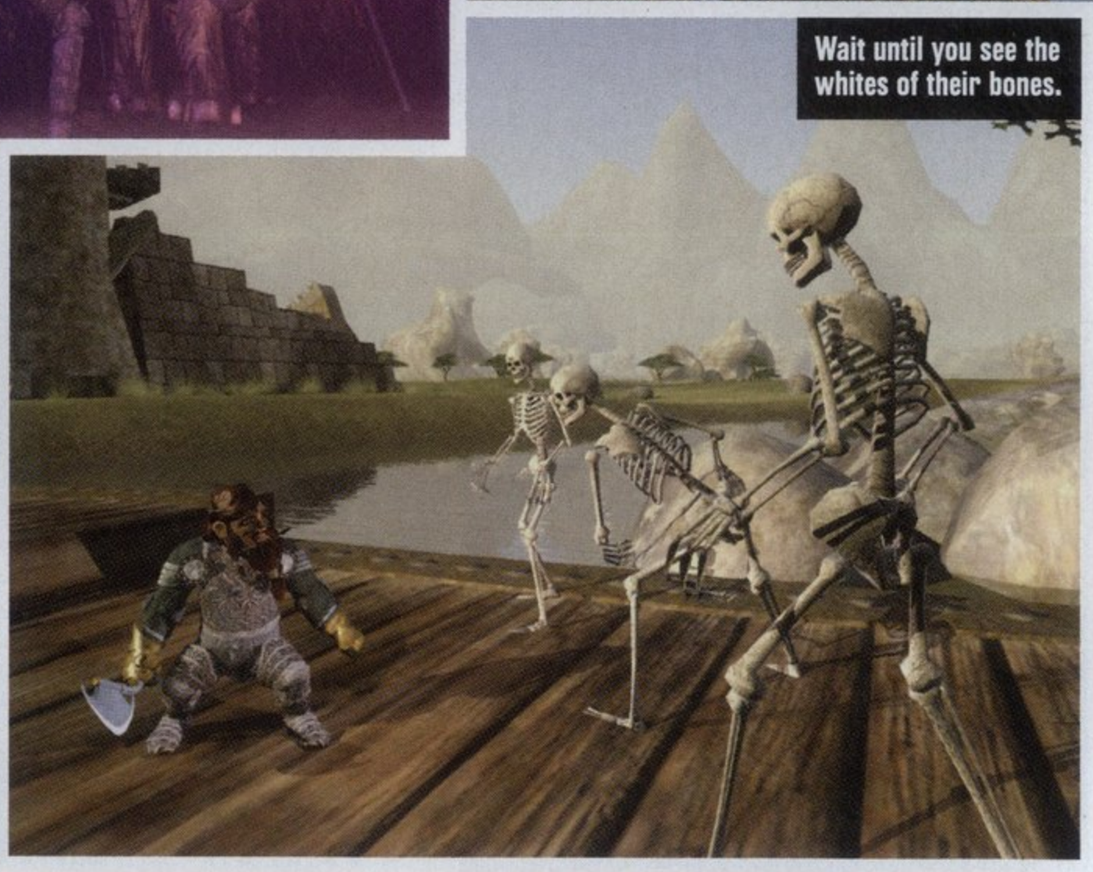
If your creation is too ugly, search the dungeons for some shiny armour. If you can't show your face, wear a mask.

When a giant dies, its various parasites must search for a new host.

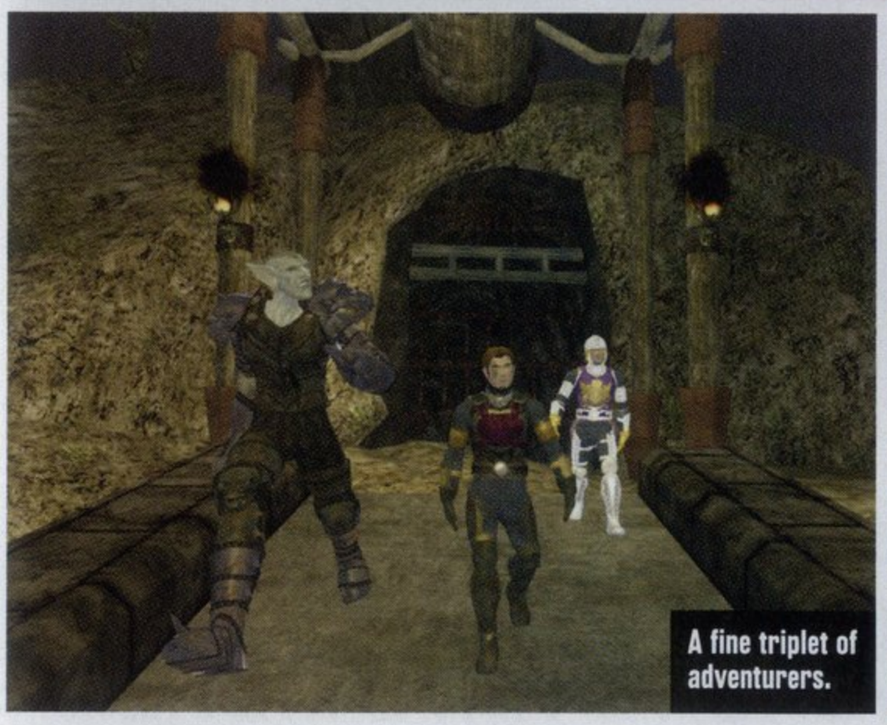
Size isn't everything. It's your STR that counts. OK, we lied, it is size really.



Your last chance to hunt an extinct beast. Kill them all.



Wait until you see the whites of their bones.



A fine triplet of adventurers.

bricks and mortar to scaly elephant hide is render quality – the massively multi-player equivalent of *Doom III*. Blakely is rightly proud of his technology. "*Everquest* was started with the expectation that it would be around for a year, maybe two. There was no understanding of what it was back then. One of the key lessons we've learnt is that *Everquest II* will be around for a long time. How do you build a product that will be around for several years? You've got to be able to make it grow with the technology. We were the first game to require 3D hardware – at the time people said 'you're crazy, why are doing that?' – now look at the 3D market. That single fact demonstrated to us that those games that drive the technology are the ones that are successful. We're overproducing this game. Our visual content simply can't be displayed in real-time on current machines. We've the expectation that three or four years from now you will. As you upgrade your video-card, the game will grow into your hardware." The depth of imagination on display is awe inspiring. The basic, rat, orc and goblin template is being rewritten in favour of aggressive octopedal eyeballs, floating be-tentacled skulls, and vicious sewer-dwelling gelatinous cubes.

"AN UNNAMED, CATASTROPHIC EVENT WILL OCCUR, WIPING OUT THE POPULATION..."

For those jaded by the current crop of massively multi-player games, with their continual grinding, spawn camping and quad kiting (see Glossary) the sharp edge of graphical advancement isn't going to draw them back. But, the changes to the basic game mechanic that Cao is experimenting with may be enough to re-awaken their interest. "In *Everquest* we found that players would log in, begin a tussle and then go off and watch a DVD. Then they'd come back in after an hour, just as the monster died. We're going to remove that, but to do so, we have to change the whole way we approach the title." This basic realisation of *Everquest*'s flaws is heartening.

"*EQII* is a game about the six man group, rather than swelled group" continues Cao. "A raid, as classically defined in *Everquest I* will not be the same thing in *Everquest II*. Unlike *Everquest* where the general solution to any problem is to apply a large amassed amount of force, *Everquest II* is much closer to pen and paper RPGs. Every player can make a key contribution to success. It takes a bit of skill continued over

THE EVERQUEST GLOSSARY

Confused by all these strange, new-fashioned terms? Here's your guide to the new online language.

QUAD KITING
To use area effect spells to kill four monsters, rather than the usual one, quadrupling the experience gained at a stroke.

GRINDING
Repetitive use of a particular skill to increase its ability.

SPAWN CAMPING
Remaining at monster spawn points, to ambush monsters as they appear. Extreme cases see players camping for more than a week.

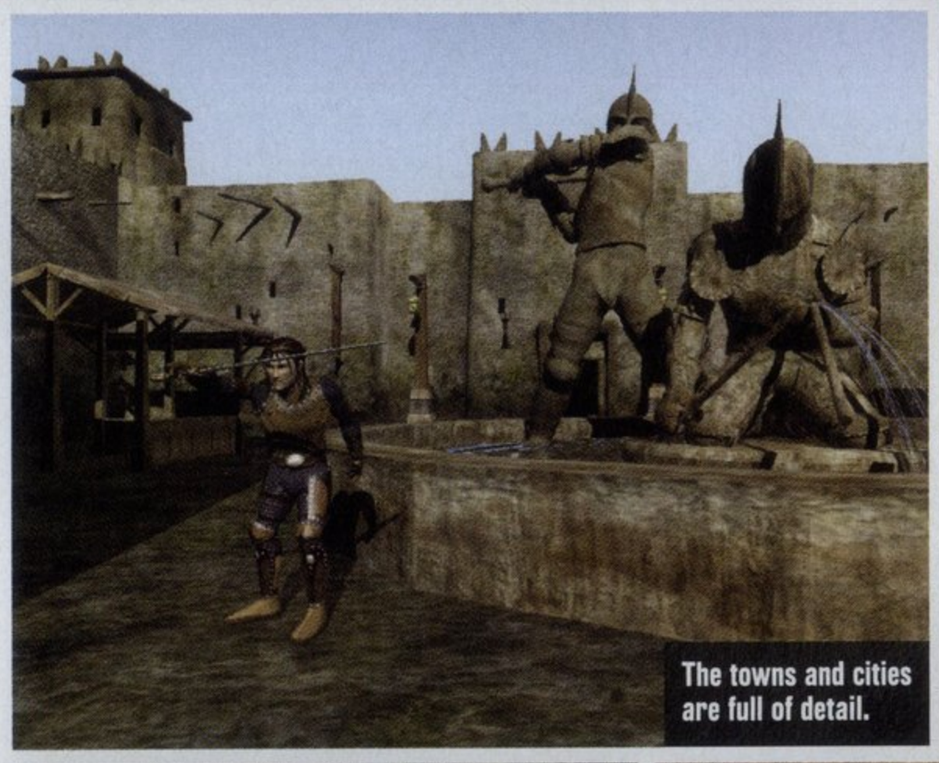
RAID
To enter hostile territory with a group purely to kill enemies.

EVERCRACK
Colloquial term highlighting *Everquest*'s addictive properties.

THE EVERQUEST MODEL
Relating experience and status within the game to time spent developing your character. Demonstrated in most MMORPGs, but since *Everquest* is the biggest, it's remains the classic example.

All the latest graphics cards feature pixie shaders.

Dungeon complexes are back with a vengeance.



The towns and cities are full of detail.

Thankfully, scantily clad women with huge breasts still have a role to play.

TALKING IN CODE

We talk to *EQII*'s Chris Cao. He talks back.

PCGA: "What makes *EQ* so popular."
I think it's because *Everquest* is so hard. When you accomplish something, or when you find a certain item, or when you level up, it means something. And it's big... there's always something else to go off and look at.

PCGA: What's it like, dealing with so many people?
It's always fascinating. We might have put a certain mechanic, or option there that we're really proud of, but instead of using it, everyone just runs straight past it on their way to something else. We're forever holding our hands up in the air, going "Why... What... Oh no!"

PCGA: Do you worry about the 'Evercrack' references?
I know people who spend far more time watching television than playing *Everquest*... The addiction side of it, as I see it, is that people are entertained, they find value in it, they find socialisation in it, but what they end up doing with that is their responsibility.

"AT THE END OF THE RAID, WE WANT PLAYERS TO HAVE MORE STORIES TO TELL..."

and a lot of lateral thinking. At the end of the raid, we want the players to have more stories to tell. 'Look how clever we were that time,' instead of 'look at how many clerics we had'." In other words, inserting a bit of old-fashioned role-playing back into *Everquest's* point-and-click combat.

Cao sees it in a different way. "To feel like a hero you have to feel like there was that crucial moment where you made a difference. That does happen occasionally in *Everquest I*, but it's for a very small percentage of the total number of people on a raid. I wouldn't look at it as '*Everquest I* players aren't going to like it,' but a guild of sixty people who would normally adventure together will be split up into very small parties, where each player matters a lot more... When you slay the dragon, it won't be because you brought half of Norrath with you."

And this is where it gets complicated because *EQII* is attempting something truly odd. Rather than simply letting players roam the landscapes, culling creatures and gaining experience, SOE are demanding that character progression be tied to an ongoing story. To reach certain standards, say level five, you'll be forced to complete character-centric quests. "The only way to make the game meaningful is to reduce the level of abstraction" insists Cao. "This game inherently has points and numbers, and we understand that it's going to draw you out of the game. When players are in our world, there's a lot of hesitancy to do quests because they'll say, 'I can be more efficient in increasing my stats if I go off and grind somewhere else'. Our quests aren't that arduous; you're not going to be doing them that often, but they're the realisation that *you're a hero*. You're a hero in a city, and part of a nation. You're a hero in response to something. To be a hero, you have to accomplish something."

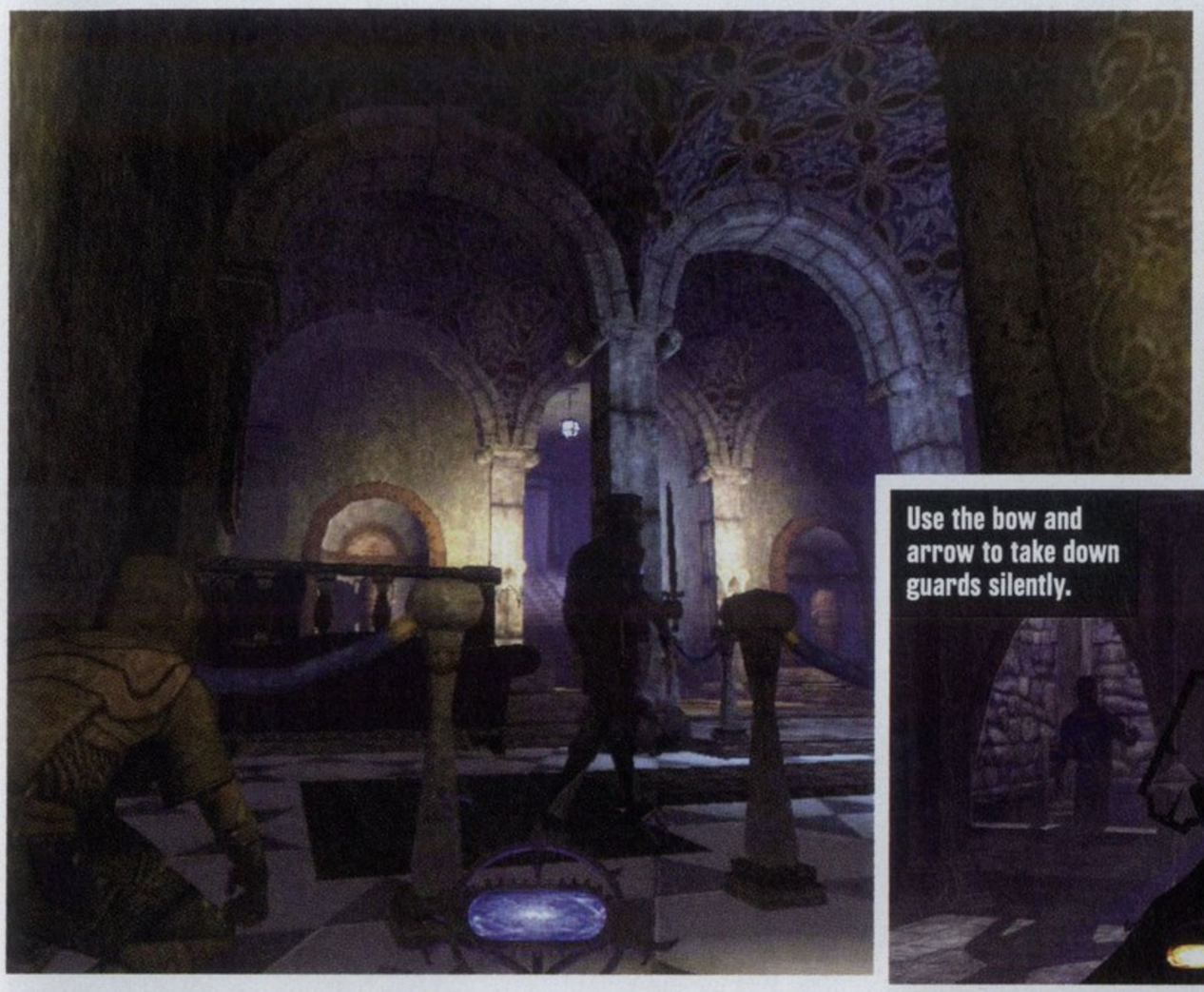
It's a brave step. The danger is that, rather than providing gamers with unique stories, it will homogenise the population, railroading character classes into consistent situations. If Sony can pull it off, however, it could just be the single spark of genius that re-ignites massively multi-player gaming.

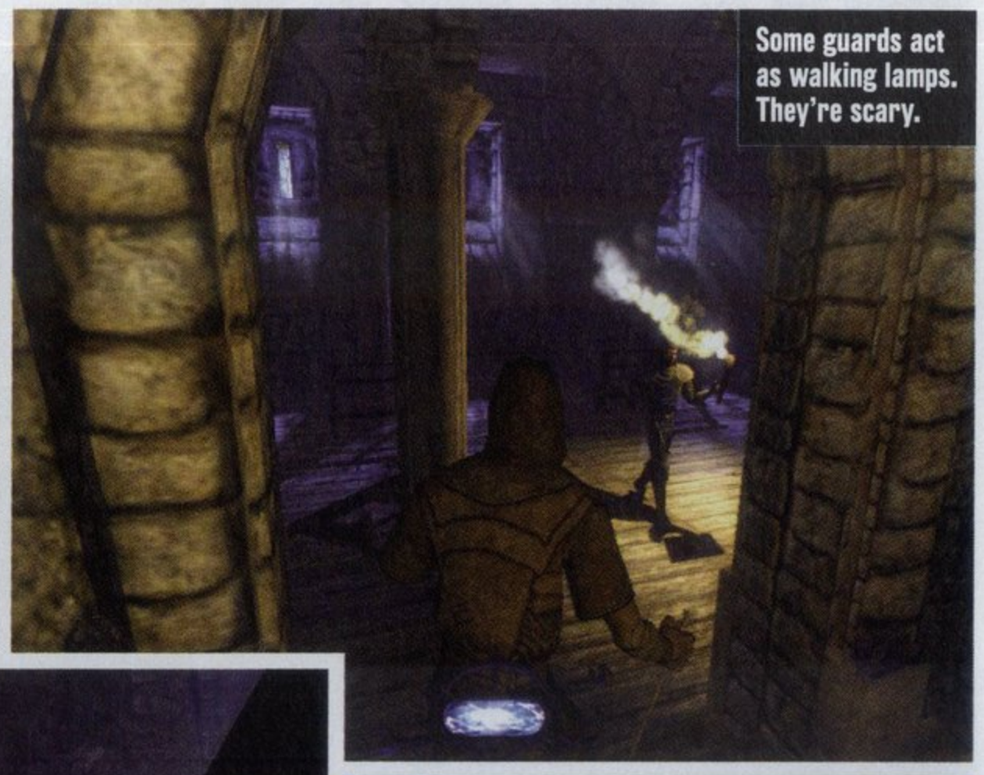
After the presentation, there's a chance to chat with the team. It quickly becomes clear that *Everquest* isn't just a business franchise to these people. Every single one of them was a player, before being cherry-picked by Sony to design the sequel. All of them genuinely care, about the genre, their game and the players. They're passionate about what they do, and they want to get *Everquest II* right. Maybe it won't be the end of the world after all.

THIEF: DEADLY SHADOWS

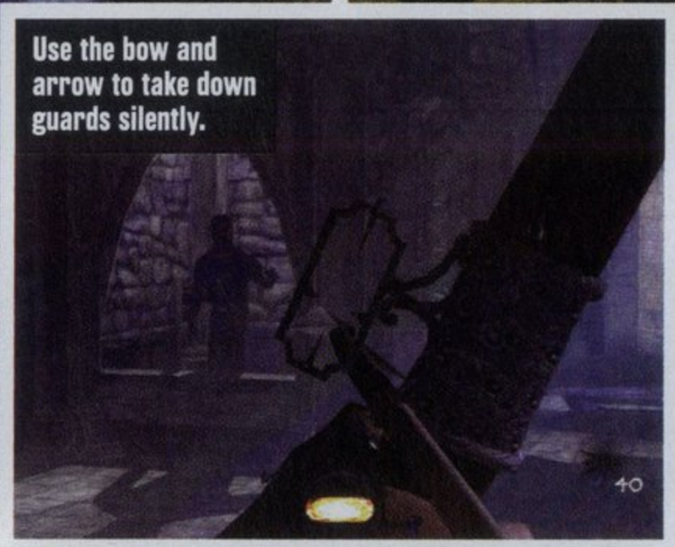
It's time for that other Ion Storm hero to step out of the shadows.

By TIM EDWARDS



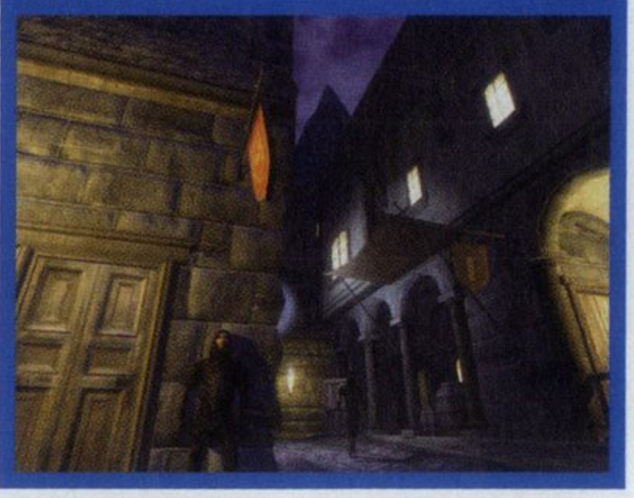


Some guards act as walking lamps. They're scary.



Use the bow and arrow to take down guards silently.

Mister! He's behind you!



MY LIFE IN SHADOW

Thief, like *Trespasser* before it, models Garrett's entire body, rather than just adding a couple of arm and weapon animations at the base of your screen. This means the developers can cast shadows off your body – letting light be blocked by you walking in front of a lantern, for example. Nice, but how do you, the player, get to see this when it might be a matter of life and death? Answer: yup, it's that third-person viewpoint again.

THIEF AT A GLANCE

Publisher: Eidos

Developer: Ion Storm

Genre: Stealth

Estimated Minimum System: PIII 1.2GHz, 256Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card

Contact: www.ionstorm.com/games

Release Date: December

What's in it for you? Lighten the pockets of industrial/medieval city dwellers, in the most advanced stealth game ever created.

STOP hyperventilating. Yes, we know what you're thinking. You've taken one glance at those screenshots, and spotted Garrett, the master thief. He's looking good, but... erk. *Thief*'s gone third person. The genre-defining first-person sneaker has gone third-person.

Long under development at Ion Storm, the third *Thief* outing has been kept very much under wraps while the team finished off the remarkable *Deus Ex: Invisible War*. But with that now out of the door, it's time for Randy Smith, *Thief*'s project director, to talk us through some of the changes.

The fundamental difference between the previous *Thief* titles and *Thief: Deadly Shadows* is not viewpoint, it's structure. The traditional sequence of missions, that staple of PC gaming, has been abandoned in favour of something that bears more resemblance to *GTA III*. Between missions Garrett is free to explore the city, running his burglary business. As Randy Smith explains: "As Garrett, you can explore the cityscape, rob from stores and mansions, pickpocket in marketplaces, take shortcuts across the rooftops, mug nobles in back alleys, dodge the City Watch, and discover hidden locations. You can meet your fence to pawn your stolen goods for cash, and get some advice on where to find the next score. You can scout out your next mission and visit stores to stock-up on thieves' tools before heading in. You can interact with the Hammers and Pagans, either working to get on their good side or breaking into their territories to rip them off. Over time, in the course of Garrett's adventures, you will leave your mark permanently on the city."

"GARRETT IS THE SAME RELUCTANT ANTI-HERO THAT WE SAW IN *THIEF* AND *THIEF 2*."

That freedom for self-expression extends to the game's story. Garrett is no longer simply carried along by events – this time, he is both actor and actuator. "In many ways, Garrett is the same reluctant anti-hero that we saw in *Thief* and *Thief 2*," says Randy. "He's still selfish, out for his own gain, unenthusiastic about helping those in need, and really just wants to be left alone to ply his trade. If there's one thing he's learned from *Thief* and *Thief 2*, it's that there's some truth to the prophecies read by the Keepers. Garrett realizes now that he can't just ignore his destiny, so in *Thief: Deadly Shadows* he has a new strategy: he's going to take the prophecies into his own hands, and decide his own fate."

Now, back to technicalities. Yes, *Thief* will include a third-person view, but first person too. There's absolutely no need to start writing angry letters to your MP. Here's how Randy explains the decision. "The third-person option adds a lot, and while we play-test, we find ourselves switching back and forth between that and first-person modes dynamically. Third-person provides better perspective on the overall environment and how Garrett fits into it; it lets you see the big picture and it affords some very compelling visuals of Garrett pulling off his cool moves: creeping along the walls, crouching in the shadows, climbing up to a second storey window, jumping out to ambush a guard. Meanwhile, first-person is generally better for the finer details, precision, a strong sense of immersion and, of course, seeing things from Garrett's perspective."

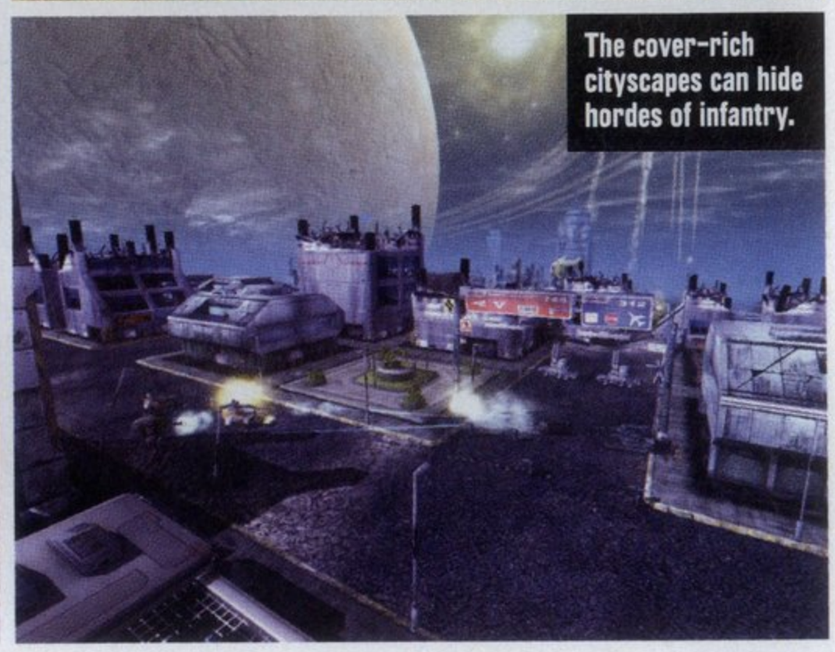
There we go. Fuss over. Lower your heart rate to something more appropriate to feverish expectation. 133bpm.

GROUND CONTROL II OPERATION EXODUS

Take your protein pills, and put your plasma-proof helmet on. Incoming!

By ALEX BICKHAM

Zoom in, and you'll find out just how scaleable the graphics are.



The cover-rich cityscapes can hide hordes of infantry.

GROUND CONTROL II

AT A GLANCE

Publisher: Vivendi

Developer: Massive

Genre: RTS

Estimated Minimum System: 1GHz, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card

Contact: www.groundcontrol2.com

Release Date: June 2004

What's in it for you? Futuristic and wonderfully detail-rich RTS that makes you focus on tactics, and doesn't hassle you with harvesting.

A thump, a whistle, and artillery rains down on the brave men of alpha squad. It's flippant bedlam at ground-zero – there are so few direct hits, it's like the gunners just don't care. But hey, who's counting? Those skull-splitting spurts of plasma spread the love around, and you just know the boys are losing limbs, lunch and life to this blanket spamming. To top it all, they're now suppressed... if by some act of God they survive, they'll suffer limited vision, reduced movement and slower reactions until they pull themselves together again.

Welcome to *Ground Control II*, the future-war RTS that pulls no punches. Every bombardment is an earth-cracker; every infantry attack a spray of light that paints the world in neon. There's a sensation of liquid movement to the game, from the slick, free-roaming camera to the fluid chatter of small-arms fire and the superb animation of the units. Sound and vision aside, you can almost *feel* those slugs striking home. Cannon recoil; tanks rock on their tracks; walkers stumble as the rockets strike. Take a magnifying glass to any part of the game, and you'll see a microbial swarm of details. Suffice to say, we're *really* looking forward to the fully-finished shell-shocker.

Cool... but your units are limited.

"PROMISES A REFINED LEVEL OF CONTROL AND ALTOGETHER MORE SPECTACULAR TABLEAU."

As RTS games go, *GCII* is very single-minded. Like its predecessor, it gives resource management the heave-ho and forces you to concentrate on matters military: ground control is, quite literally, the name if the game. More specifically, it's about unseating enemy positions and capturing landing zones. These LZs are the only points at which your dropship can disgorge fresh troops.

Unlike its RTS stablemates, *GCII* doesn't let you build endless units, although some missions award you with more unit-tokens as you capture enemy positions. These allow you to call down reinforcements via dropship. The dropship is in fact your most useful unit, as it not only plays ferryman, but also fulfils a battlefield support role with its onboard weaponry. However, it can only provide supporting fire for a brief period before rocketing back to the mothership far above.

The limited-forces factor is key to the *GCII* experience, as it means that you need to use the units you have with care, and to the very best of their abilities. What it doesn't mean is digging in and hoping to weather the onslaught. You need to be constantly on the lookout for breakthrough opportunities and weak spots in the enemy lines. Wars of attrition are too costly... and *so* last century.

FACTION ACTION

GCII **gives you the choice of playing as the Northern Star Alliance (the goodies), the Terran Empire (the imperialist bad guys) and the Virons (weirdy alien types). While the human factions sport various configurations of tanks, troops, walkers and fliers, the recently announced Virons are a little more experimental. Employing nanotechnology in their battlefield units, they don't call reinforcements down by dropship; they meld units together to form new types. Have a look at the movie on this issue's discs to see for yourself.**

The grunts of *GCII* are immensely detailed, both visually and in their animation.

Deadly long-range weaponry.

Welcome to *Flab Control II: Operation Aerobicus.*

"Ooh! Quick! Look at the pretty ligh..."

APCs still play a vital role.

The mechanics of command are made simple by the fact that camera control is so beautifully intuitive and smooth. The amount of freedom the camera's slick swoopiness offers is pretty much unrivalled, providing a level of control akin to that of *Homeworld II*. And when it comes to commanding troops in an RTS environment, having a responsive camera is half the battle. It feels great to skim around the battlefield, checking out the ground or enemy positions from any scale, and most importantly, it flatters you with a sense of total control. In short, it makes you feel like a pro.

But it's effective troop command that really earns you such honorifics. And here, too, the tools are perfectly suited to the task. The interface features unit markers, so even with the camera zoomed out, you've a good idea of how your forces are spread across the battlefield. Presentation helps too, as every shot fired leaves a trail in the air and has a marked effect on its target, making it immediately obvious which enemies your units are peppering with fire.

Alongside light and heavy infantry, there's a goodly selection of hovertanks, landcruisers, walkers and flyers to play with, not to mention the dropship itself. Each performs a fairly specific role, and it's combined arms as much as tactics that'll help you win the day. Again though, there are no disposable heroes. Even the grunts, the traditional RTS cannon fodder, are crucial to the war effort. And with the benefits that terrain offers him, the humble infantryman is one of the most flexible, multi-role units in your arsenal. Stick him in the woods, and he'll be invisible to all but the closest enemy units, not to mention the considerable armour bonus woods confer. Hump him up a hill, and his rifle will out-range the enemy's equivalent. It's factors such as terrain and weather (the latter of which brings detrimental effects to your units, such as reduced accuracy and line-of-sight) that promise to make *GCII* a broader tactical challenge than the likes of *C&C Generals*. Granted, a lot of these elements aren't new to RTS, but few games have managed to tie them all together into a single tasty package.

We just get the sense that Massive are doing things right with *Ground Control II*. Not that they did anything wrong with the first game, mind, but as a sequel, *GCII* promises more tactical depth, a refined level of control and an altogether more spectacular tableau. Here's hoping it delivers the payload. Though we're not sure the brave men of Alpha Squad would concur.

DROP ZONE

Your precious dropship, which is your only means of getting new troops onto the ground, can also fulfil a variety of support roles. It can be upgraded to carry sensors and used as a scout, beefed up with bolt-on armour to drop troops into more hostile areas, or loaded with more powerful weapons to add weight of fire to your ground forces.

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STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT

Star Wars has found a new *Battlefield*, and the rebellion has moved online. And this time, you don't have to let the Wookiee win.

By TIM EDWARDS

We're entering the age of dream gaming. The old limitations of videogames have essentially been overcome. If developers have the resources, they can create a playable representation of anything. We all wanted to duel as Jedi, and with the creation of *Jedi Knight* we could. We longed to dive-bomb tanks in a Spitfire, dodging flak and skimming across the desert. *Battlefield 1942* let us. We wished to fight in an endless online war, playing as a tiny cog in a conflict spanning continents. *PlanetSide* granted our wish. But there's still something missing. We still love Star Wars. We still love gaming. We still dream of piloting AT-ATs, watching the puny rebel forces fleeing underfoot. And now, LucasArts are going to make our dream come true.

Star Wars: Battlefront takes all the fun, carnage and chaos of *Battlefield 1942*, wraps it all up in a shiny stormtrooper uniform, and sends it off to find its destiny online. It's such a simple, cute idea – give the peope what they want, make it good. It's going to be *massive*.

We spoke to Jim Tso, LucasArts producer for *Star Wars: Battlefront*, and asked him exactly what we should expect from the game. "Hoth is the obvious example. Everyone knows the Battle of Hoth. What we're doing is providing the vehicles, the environment and the character classes, but what happens in the battle is up to the players. It's kind of a running joke here at LucasArts: we always have to have a Hoth sequence for every Star Wars game we do. But I don't think you've ever played the Battle of Hoth this way. You and I could hop into a snowspeeder and you could be the rear gunner, firing the tow cable, you and I could *actually* be re-enacting the

continued over

"We dream of piloting AT-ATs, watching the puny rebel forces fleeing underfoot."

EXCLUSIVE!

FULL FRONTAL

Indoor areas like this (above) will feature. You need some shelter from the withering fire.

scenes from the movie. This is completely freeform."

Knights of the Old Republic shifted the goalposts a little, taking place 4,000 years pre-a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. That time-buffer allowed Bioware breathing space for some ideas of their own. This time around, *Battlefront* is going to dodge the issue. They're taking direct inspiration from the movies, and they're letting you play as your heroes. "There are two things we focus on when we make a Star Wars game," Jim explains, "most of the time it's not a problem, but we need to mention it. The first thing we focus on is fun; you know, the gameplay. And then we have to make sure that what we present to you feels like Star Wars. That means tweaking the weapons, or the equipment, to make it seem right. I think Star Wars as a universe is pretty appropriate for the type of games that we're doing. We're trying to fill in the gaps with what you didn't see in the movies or read about in the books."

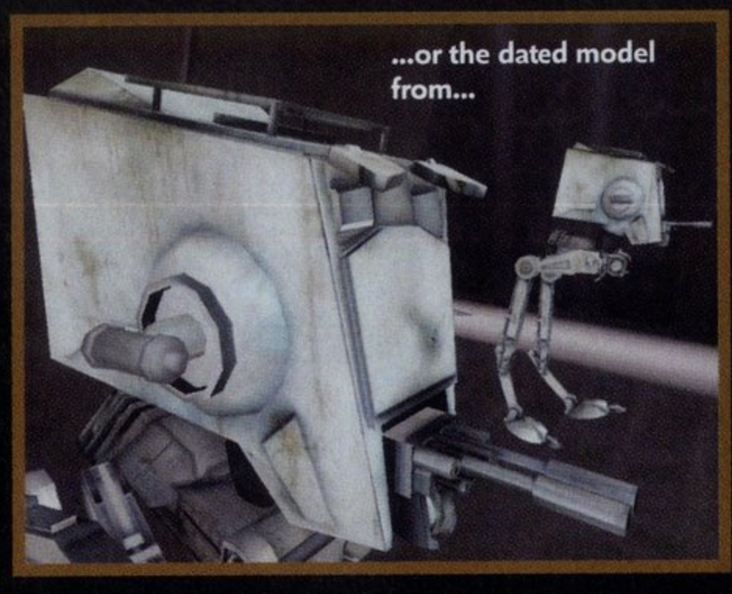
"As you get home from work, the AT-ATs begin their march upon Hoth..."

Star Wars is a coherent universe that extends way past the original trilogy, into the realms of comics, books, and the occasional Christmas musical extravaganza. There's a wealth of material out there, and LucasArts are taking full advantage of this. "One of the things that will be

MODERN WARFARE

Galactic Conquest isn't just the name of the strategy portion of *Battefront* – it's the title of a Star Wars mod for *Battlefield 1942*, released in March 2003. In a surprising twist, the files for *GC* can be downloaded from LucasArts own servers, along with a trailer soundtracked by the John Williams score. Tso holds the *GC* team in high regard. "I've had a little contact with them, when we started the game, they announced themselves a month or so after we started the game. I wish them the best of luck, but we're getting paid to do this. If we can't do a better job than they can, then really, we shouldn't be doing this at all."

Will you chose the AT-ST from *Star Wars: Battlefront*...



...or the dated model from...

... *BF 1942 Galactic Conquest?*

Fixed gun emplacements make useful defesive positions. The bigger the blaster, the larger the hole.

choosing which vehicles make most sense. Obviously, the X-Wing will be available on more than one map, but we're not going to stick it in every map. The jungles of Yavin is our smallest level, and it's really more of an infantry battle. Endor's an enormous forest, and not really appropriate to aircraft. You don't see them in the movies, and they wouldn't really work in the context of that map, flying above the trees. Endor's really all about the AT-STs and speeder bikes, whereas Tatooine is mostly desert, and it's dominated by X-Wings and TIE-Fighters."

LucasArts have also taken note of some of the problems players are running into when trying to pilot aeroplanes. The carcasses of crashed Spitfires and rusty Zeros litter virtual battlegrounds from Britain to the Philippines, where pilots were too eager to take time out to learn the archaic controls of WWII craft. LucasArts plan to make flying an X-Wing far more straightforward. "We're using Star Wars physics," explains Jim, "which tend to be a little different to real physics. If you're piloting a helicopter in real life, it has performance characteristics, that overcomplicate things. If we take an X-Wing, in theory it can hover in space or over the battlefield – if you want to present an easy target. In theory you shouldn't be able to crash an X-Wing, unless you're pointing at the ground and zooming in."

"We're using Star Wars physics, which tends to be a little different to real physics..."

But it's not just about X-Wings and TIE-Fighters. Although the new films have been vilified by many, they do contain some genuinely awe-inspiring skirmishes. Jim is clearly excited by some of the opportunities that George Lucas' latest vision affords them. "One of the coolest vehicles we've got is the Republic gunship from Episode Two. We can fit six guys in there and everyone has something to do. The pilot has to fly it, there are two rocket launchers on the wings and everyone else piles in those dinky little ball turrets. It's incredible fun." The number of people within each continued over

really apparent when you sit down to play the game will be the variety of the environments," says Jim. "Our ideas are ones that *Battlefield* simply can't do. We're a science fiction based universe and can therefore get away with a lot more. For example, one of the maps we're most excited about right now is Kamino (the water planet where the clones come from). It's dominated by huge platforms that extend above the water. It's always raining torrentially, there's a big storm, it's a very cool looking level that looks like nothing that's been done before." In Episode Two, we see Jango Fett flitting from stage to stage, using his jetpack to leap across the void. What are the chances of a similar toy to play with in *Battlefront*? "Yeah" replies Jim, "that does make sense. But we'll leave it at that for now..."

Imagine. Every night the Star Destroyers come out of hyperspace early, necessitating a ground assault. As you get home from work, the AT-ATs begin their relentless march across the ice fields of Hoth. Every night, you get to be the hero, Wedge Antilles, Luke Skywalker, Anakin Skywalker and Han Solo, rolled into one. And every night, 31 other heroes, online, join your cause, running around like force-enabled madmen. This is the dream of entire generations of Star Wars fans. It's telling that every online game has, in one shape or form, been home to an unauthorised Star Wars mod, including *Battlefield 1942*. Now, LucasArts are putting their full weight behind what will undoubtedly become the definitive online Star Wars game.

Their willingness to experiment within the formula belies a canny eye for what works in multi-player gaming. In any online shooter, the chance to rise above the melee, whether it's in a WWII Spitfire in *Battlefield 1942* or one of *Halo*'s banshees, is a profoundly liberating experience. As is screaming out of the sun, hurling volley after volley of laser death into your fleeing opponents. But if vehicles are handled badly, it can be disastrous – just look at *Counter-Strike*'s abysmal vehicles. Happily, Jim has it all worked out. "We're looking at each map and

FULL FRONTAL

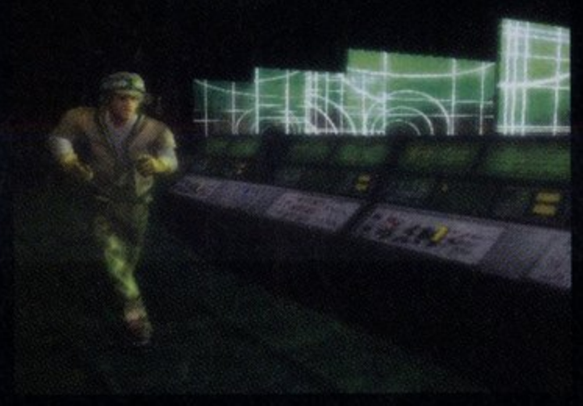
vehicle is a balancing issue – and it's causing a few headaches for the Tso and his team. "If we look at the actual Star Wars resources it says that an AT-AT can carry up to 40 troops. Now, if we have a server with 32 players and no AI units, we'll have the entire team in one unit. So, for us, it's about what feels right for the Star Wars universe." And clearly, you don't want to put all your stormtroopers in one basket.

Don't expect every possible tank, hovercraft, or Ewok hang-glider to be included within *Battlefront* for completeness' sake. Jim understands that there is a fine line to be walked. "Every vehicle has to make sense. For instance, the only difference between a TIE-Fighter and a TIE-Interceptor in the Star Wars universe is that the TIE-Interceptor is a faster, upgraded version. Unless there's a really meaningful difference, we're really not going to put it in. We'd certainly put the TIE-Bomber in, because that offers an entirely different function to the TIE fighter or TIE-Interceptor. It really depends on the battle experience. On the wide, open maps we'll probably include the most variety of vehicles."

The number of toys also depends on the size of the map; on a relatively small map with lots of cover, you don't really need aerial units. While LucasArts haven't compiled an exact size of the areas involved, consider it to be measured in square kilometres, rather than square feet.

If *Battlefront* is going to set itself apart from *Battlefield*, it needs to inject new ideas into the genre. Thankfully, LucasArts and developers Pandemic have these in spades. First, there's the campaign mode. Online gaming is a detached beast: unless you're involved in competitive gaming, there's little continuity between one map and the next. *Battlefront* is attempting to offer a connection between conflicts. "Because *Battlefront* is always a team based game, be it Rebels versus Imperials or Republic versus Separatists, we're dividing the galaxy up between those two teams. Maybe there are seven or eight different planets; the two teams will, at the beginning of the game, choose which planets they own. They then take turns trying to conquer the opponents' planets. The reason you want to do that is, each planet has its own power-up. We're supporting both time

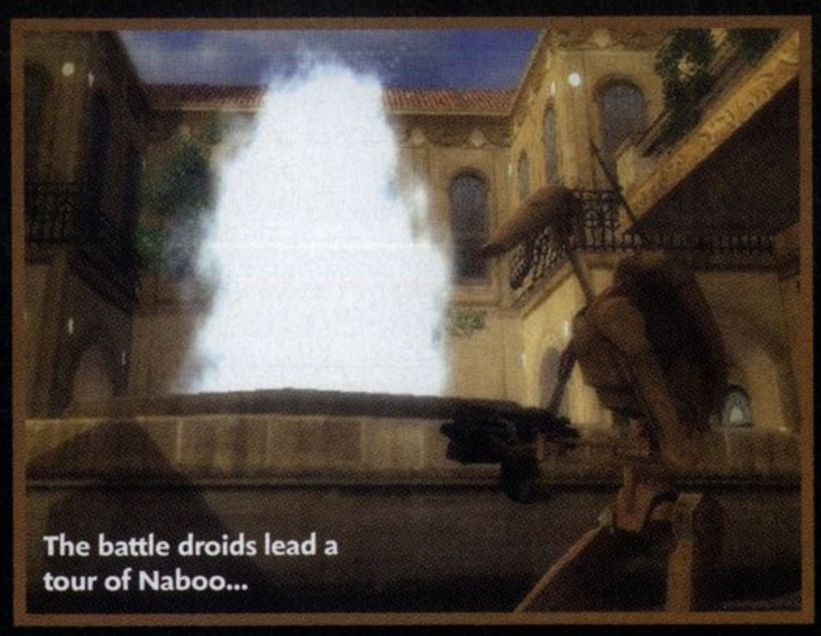
The rag-tag Rebellion are the only force who show their faces. They're beautiful.



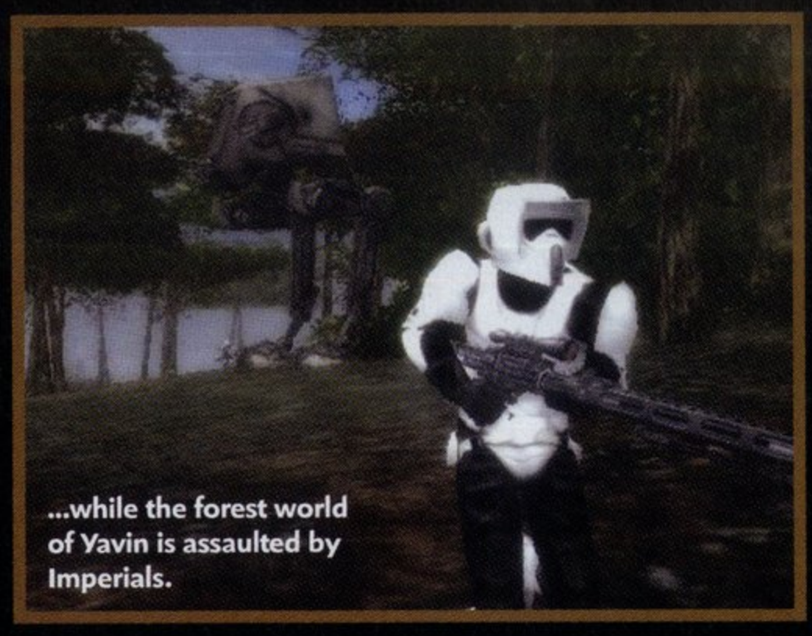
"Hold on to a planet long enough, and you get to build your own Death Star."

REBELS IN TIME

Pandemic are planning to include conflicts from both the original trilogy, and the newfangled, special effect dominated later films. It's an astute move, providing a wider range of environments than a few drab deserts and forests. The game will also flesh out the Clone Wars story spanning the void between Episode 2 and 3.



The battle droids lead a tour of Naboo...



...while the forest world of Yavin is assaulted by Imperials.

Stormtroopers will be crawling all over an X-Wing crash site.

A clone trooper sergeant. Bad news for the baddies.

"The AI-controlled Ewoks may try to steal Imperial speeder bikes..."

periods, the Clone Wars and the Galactic Civil War, and we're planning for ten different planets. Four of those planets are tied to their time period – Kamino and Geonosis you play in the Clone Wars. To begin with, Kamino belongs to the Republic; as long as it stays in Republic hands they will always get a 10% bonus to their reinforcement respawn. Kamino only has one map – but most planets that we call the 'neutral' planet, will have two maps. If the Republic loses Kamino, it doesn't change hands, it's lost from the game entirely. For the Imperial side, the opposite of Kamino would be Geonosis. As long as the Seperatists, or the Battledroids own Geonosis, they'll get a bonus to their reinforcements. If the Republic defeats the Seperatists on Geonosis, Geonosis is out of the game."

It's such a beautiful idea. Over the course of an evening's play, you'll be involved in your own interplanetary saga: conflict raging across a virtual galaxy. But don't expect to simply capture a planet at one sitting. "Planets, like Naboo, Yavin or Endor will have two maps each that can be fought over, back and forth, until one side dominates both." How long it takes for a single side to dominate a galaxy is up to you. The game doesn't end until every planet is under the control of one side.

This raises an interesting question. In a team game, who gets to choose where the next attack takes place? The answer is simple enough: "Players can nominate a commander for the duration of the war, or alternatively, the next step will be decided by the player with the highest score from the previous map."

The reward for dominating a map doesn't just extend to simple numerical improvements. "The Imperials probably have the coolest bonus, if they can hold on to a planet for long enough... they get to build a Death Star (see Death Start). Whoever controls the Death Star can wipe out a planet from the map at will. That kind of enormous power can bring a very quick end to a game." It's also useful for cowing uppity princesses. For those who just want to dip in and continued over

Q&A

A quickfire round with *Battlefront* producer, Jim Tso.

When a player joins a server, what's he going to see? What's your vision for the game?
What they see at the command post will depend on what side they're fighting on. If they're playing for the Rebels you might see a couple of X-Wings parked outside. If you're an Imperial, you might see an AT-ST, or an AT-AT or TIE-Fighters, and your team-mates running about, all dressed in the Imperial or Rebel uniforms. The command posts are holograms – when you come close to capturing the point the colour will bleed out, and your logo appear.

What's the objective?
We're going to be doing something called Conquest. The vehicles will spawn at command posts, you can also resupply, re-arm and heal. The game is about reducing a ticker down to zero – the more command posts you hold, the quicker that occurs.

How many classes?
That's kind of in flux at the moment. We're in the process of balancing, so we're trying classes to see if they work, and if they're fun. There should be a minimum of five classes per side.

What about players? How many people will play on one server?
We're shooting for 32 over the internet. On a LAN or over network we'll be looking for far more than that.

Already there's masses of gossip about the game. That must fill you with confidence.
Hell yes. It's gratifying to see that, it's lovely to see that we've already got an audience.

***Battlefront* has the potential to be a incredible cinematic experience, that you log onto every night...**
Yeah, exactly. The plan is to let you create the moments. We don't have to script them. We're just providing you with a virtual version of Cowboys and Indians.

Do you have any plans to support mod makers?
I don't think we'll discourage that, but in terms of time, and support, I don't know if we'll have the time to put together a good SDK.

The Clone Troopers. You too have a little bit of Jango inside you.

out of the game, without worrying about a grand strategic arc, there will be the option for server admins to just string a clutch of maps together, and let them cycle through.

"As an Imperial, you can summon Darth Vader to help you out..."

But to do that would be to miss out on some electrifying moments. You and your team-mates aren't alone in the attack. Controlling certain planets allows AI controlled cohorts to accompany you. "Tatooine is where all these incredible heroes come from. If you're playing as an Imperial, you'll be able to summon the powerful Darth Vader to help you out." Just imagine it. You're under heavy rebel assault. No matter how many stormtroopers you throw at the Rebel defences, you just can't gain a foothold. Then, the Imperial shuttle lands, and a solitary, caped figure steps from the ramp. Jim can't help but get animated at this point. "When Darth Vader enters the map, you can hear him before you see him. You totally get into it: 'Oh my god, it's Darth Vader!' because he can just deflect laser bolts away. When the guys tested the game, they ran into this one incident where Vader was hunting down a scout, and the scout was backing up against a tree. At this moment, the scout played his 'idle' animation, looking left or right, like he's trapped, before Vader sliced him in two with the lightsaber. There are all these little moments that we don't script at all, but they just blow you away. If you're playing as the Imperials, you want to be behind Vader, because he'll deflect all the laser fire away from you. If you're playing as a Rebel, it might be time to grab the nearest X-Wing and flee." Alongside Vader will be a whole host of AI aggressors, including Luke Skywalker, Mace Windu and Count Dooku. Jim Henson's hand has yet to be confirmed.

These non-player characters aren't limited to simple activated moments. Throughout the levels, you'll come across a third AI side that may help, or hinder your progress. "On Endor, the Ewoks will help the rebels," says Jim. "At certain command posts, they might try and steal Imperial speeder bikes. As an Imperial player, you're going to have to deal with that, as well as the

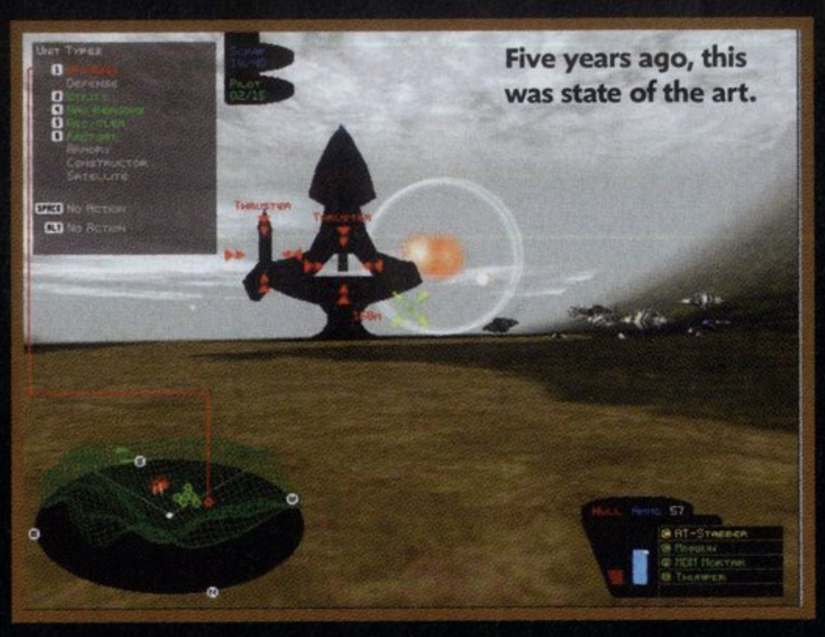
THE PLANETS

The blue emerald of Naboo, homeworld of a certain J J Binks.

Seven planets from the movies have been confirmed for inclusion in the game – although the battles won't necessarily be those that are seen in the film. In the Clone Wars series of books and comics, for example, there is a tremendous battle at Kamino, where the Seperatists destroy the Republic's clone facilities. It's this enormous clash that *Battlefront* will explore. Other planets announced include Naboo, Hoth (well, obviously), along with the forest worlds of Yavin and Endor, redolent with Ewokian malevolence. Tatooine will also put in an appearence, as will Geonosis, the site of the climactic encounter of Episode Two. Expect all manner of insectoidal delights, along with the African Art-inspired battledroids and vast armies of Clone Troopers.

VIRAL CONFRONTATION

Battlefront is being developed outside of LucasArts, by Pandemic Studios. They're more than qualified: as well as creating the gorgeous *Full Spectrum Warrior*, they're also responsible for 1998's *Battlezone*. Jim believes they're the perfect team for such a project: "*BF 1942* is an obvious inspiration but Pandemic like to point out that you could get in and out of vehicles, and you could snipe people, in *Battlezone*. *1942* was definitely the first time to bring it all together in a battlefield environment, but it wasn't a new idea."



Five years ago, this was state of the art.

This time, the focus will be on the experience of war, rather than the direction of battle, with the real-time strategy elements of *BZ* that proved such a draw abandoned in favour of running and gunning.

A small man with authority over big robots. Well, they are the *evil* Empire.

rebels. On Tatooine, the AI controls the Tusken Raiders, who'll attack both teams on sight. They'll try and take over command posts as well." This is deeply hilarious on so many levels. As a stormtrooper, not only will you have to deal with Rebel forces popping blaster bolts from behind overturned logs at your defences, the Ewok army are causing their own unique brand of mischief, running off with all your hardware. How the AI behaves depends on the race and time period. The Tusken Raiders that you run into on Tatooine will always be hostile, along with the Sarlaac pit. Yes, a Sarlaac pit. "You have to be careful around it, because if you get too close, the tentacles will come out and grab you. One of the tactics we've come up with in our office, is to toss grenades at your enemies, to knock them down into the pit."

While the grand, overriding strategy is provided by the Galactic Conquest mode, in-game tactical depth is provided by you choosing a player class, depending on the role or objective you wish to achieve. "Each side has different characteristics – for instance we expect the Imperials to have a little slower movement speed, while being a little bit tougher. Of course, the stormtroopers are meant to be wearing armour."

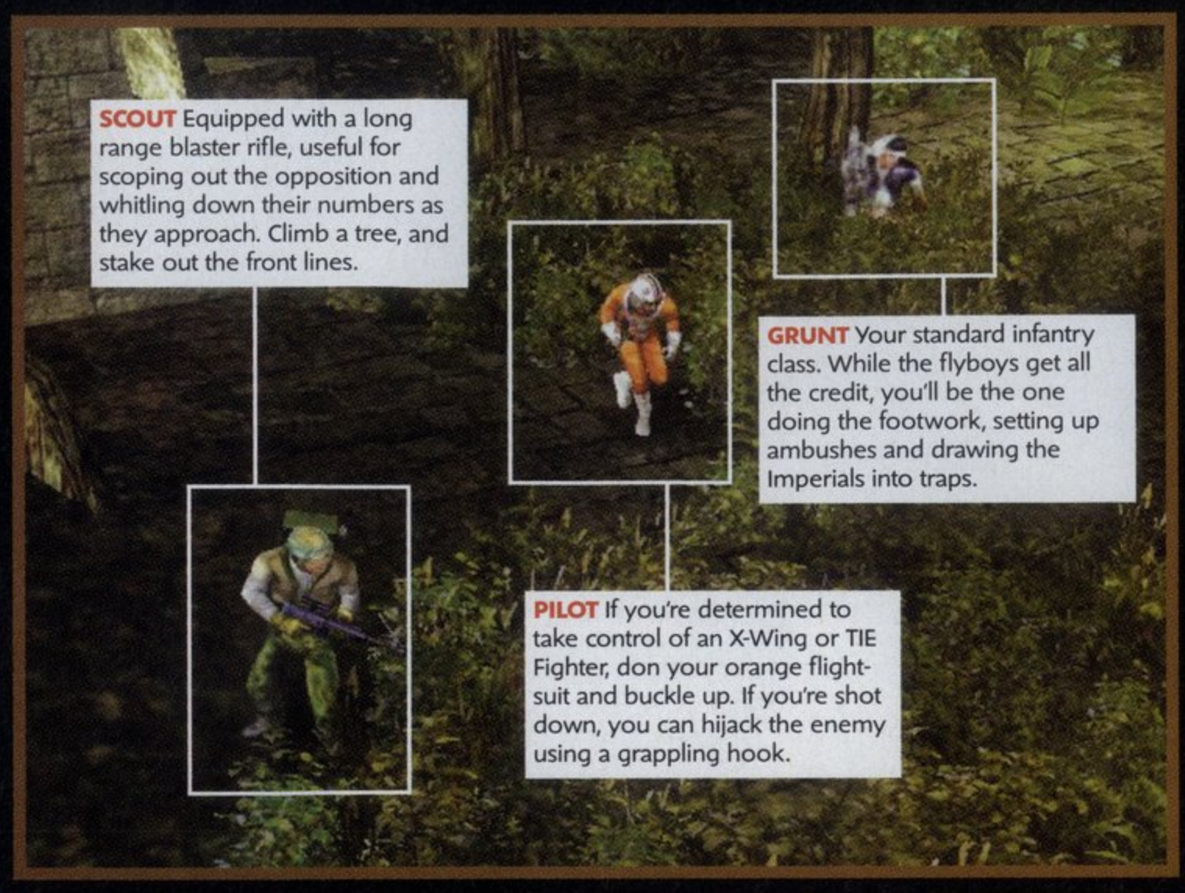
The make-up of those classes will change between sides. "There's definitely going to be the basic infantry trooper, there will be someone with an anti-vehicle focus, with a bigger gun and then we'll probably have some type of scout unit with a sniper rifle, some kind of long distance gun. Then, we'll basically depart, with some special units for each side."

This is where the game is likely to come alive. Star Wars is filled with glorious incidental detail, tiny ideas that can be expanded on. Finding fun tasks is simply a matter of sitting down in front of a wide-screen television with a notepad and a tub of popcorn. "For the Imperial side, their special unit right now is the Imperial officer. He can heal troops, he can also deploy a probe droid to steer remotely around the battlefield. The cool thing about the probe droid is he can also call continued over

"If you get too close to the Sarlaac pit, the tentacles grab you."

PLAYER TYPES

Player classes are back in fashion on the virtual battlefield. Each has multiple roles to fill, and aren't limited to strictly defined tasks. When you respawn, you'll consider exactly what you want to do next: between shoring up your own defences, taking the fight to the enemy by harrassing their front lines, or some other, devious plan. Perhaps you could inflitrate the Imperial base and turn their AT-STs against them, Ewok style?



SCOUT Equipped with a long range blaster rifle, useful for scoping out the opposition and whitling down their numbers as they approach. Climb a tree, and stake out the front lines.

GRUNT Your standard infantry class. While the flyboys get all the credit, you'll be the one doing the footwork, setting up ambushes and drawing the Imperials into traps.

PILOT If you're determined to take control of an X-Wing or TIE Fighter, don your orange flight-suit and buckle up. If you're shot down, you can hijack the enemy using a grappling hook.

in a bombardment from orbit. He can drop off a beacon, and sound a warning, but then that area is pretty much going to be pummelled from space." The Clone Wars are dominated by automatons, robots forged deep in the underground factories of Geonosis. In a novel touch, you can ditch the limitations of pale flesh, in favour of titanium and silicon. "We have the basic battledroids from Episode One, or the super battledroids, which is the silver guy from Episode Two. You can also play as the droidikas, which are the guys with the shields who roll around. The droidikas are almost like mobile gun turrets, which when they're deployed move very slowly, but can fire at incredible rates." When they're not open, you can move freely, in a *Super Droidika Ball* fashion, but you'll be vulnerable to fire. And, presumably, to your own team-mates trying to push you down a big hill.

Although LucasArts are considering a pilot class, the cockpits will be open to all. Jim explains the decision like this: "Anyone can pilot a vehicle, but pilots are the only class who can fix vehicles. When they're in a vehicle it will slowly regenerate health reflecting a pilot's familiarity with his craft. And, pilots are the only ones who auto-eject when a vehicle explodes... but in the case of the Rebel pilots, they also have a grappling hook: that's really useful for getting up on to the top of an AT-AT or a wall." Expect Tarzan-like tree-swinging, to rival even the most nimble Wookiee.

All this sounds wonderful. *Star Wars: Battlefront* is literally a dream game. As with most high-intensity online games of this kind, there is one potential stumbling block: what about gamers who aren't tied to their local telephone exchange by fibre-optic cable? Will players without a broadband connection be able to get their Snowspeeder fix? Of course they will.

Pandemic are building bots for you to fight with offline, to either practise fundamental skills so you don't make an embarrassment of yourself online, or just to muck about with. Of course, you can boss them about, like your own personal Clone army. Consider yourself a better looking Yoda. Jim thinks they've figured out a better way of working

Stormtrooper armour: great protection but rubbish camouflage.

"*Battlefront* has its roots in every Star Wars game ever coded."

Pilots are trained by a mysterious sect of scuba divers.

with friendly AI than most developers. "The way it works is, you won't be able to give every bot on your team orders. It's done in a radius – bots within a certain area will respond to your direction. The plan is to make that as context sensitive as possible. If you're not in a vehicle, there'll be really basic stuff like 'follow me', 'stay here', or 'attack that target'. If you're in a vehicle it might be 'get in, get out.'"

You won't be forced into playing the maps separately, either. The plan is to put you right in the middle of the Galactic Conquest mode, allowing you to make choices, develop strategies and learn about the fundamental tactical choices you make in the meta-game. Imagine a simple turn-based strategy game, where between turns, you stick a hulking great blaster pistol to the base of your visor, and take part in the invasions you've set in motion.

"We've been waiting for this game since first-person shooters were invented."

There's so much to look forward to here. We've been waiting for this game since first-person shooters were invented. It has roots in every Star Wars game ever coded, from the original arcade cabinet, where you shot down wireframe TIE-Fighters, to *X-Wing* and *TIE-Fighter* itself. LucasArts have dabbled in online gaming before: *X-Wing vs TIE-Fighter* was a game ahead of its time. Now, they can pour all that experience, and all that passion, into creating a truly populist game, while moving online first-person shooters in a new direction. The use of AI partners is a novel, brilliant move. In the past, online maps have felt empty, simple arenas of death. *Battlefront* is taking us one step closer to fighting in a living world. The Galactic Conquest campaign is another leap forward – building a bridge between the persistent world of *PlanetSide* and simpler, stand-alone maps. There's so much potential. But it only takes one fumble. Tso understands the challenge: "When you say that yes, it's Star Wars, with everything that makes *Battlefield* fun, then the expectations are sky high. But we have to make sure that we're making something interesting, that lives up to what everyone wants." And that's why *Battlefront* has risen right to the top of our wishlists. The Force is strong with this one.

■ **We're eagerly anticipating playing *Battlefront* in winter 2004.**

A laser rifle has no use for an extended muzzle. Again, George Lucas breaks science.

DEATH START

MOVIE SPOILER!

What's all this about building a Death Star? According to Star Wars lore, the first Death Star was constructed over the outer-rim world of Despayre. Good, subtle use of symbolism there. During our interview, Tso mentioned that some Episode Three content would be included. Could we be granted the Death Star as a bonus for holding Despayre? And does this mean the plot of Episode Three will concern the building of a funny, moon-like space station with an overpowered barbeque?

That's no moon.

WHERE DID HE COME FROM?

THE SECOND TO LAST THING THAT'LL GO THROUGH YOUR MIND

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PlayStation 2

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PlayStation 2

PC GAMES addict

REVIEWS

In which we put every new release to our panel of PC gaming experts.

Armed To The Teeth

Or sick to the teeth with shooting pains?

Have you noticed how absurdly obsessed we PC gamers are with war, guns and killings? Even when a game's focus is not war itself, violence somehow drifts to the fore. Not that violence ever hurt anybody, of course, but it's a shame that other fields of human endeavour are so rarely represented in PC gaming.

Take this month's motley line-up for example. Titles like *Armed and Dangerous*, *Battlefield Vietnam*, *Universal Combat*, *Vietcong: Fist Alpha* and *Black Hawk Down: Team Sabre* all suggest a combative theme. I'd love to think that we gamers would happily spend our cash on alternatives such as *Love and Peace: Unending Chuminess* or *Cross-Stitcher: An Adventure* in Thread, but perhaps I'm underestimating the glacial inevitability of market forces.

Despite all these gat-laden games abound, we're still without a single review score above 90 this issue. The end of such games then? No, just further inspiration for the publishers to go about delivering more excessively graphic violence and shocking realism till they do manage to get such a glowing review.

ROSS ATHERTON
REVIEWS EDITOR

THE PC GAMES ADDICT MACHINES

There's no point reviewing new games on old PCs, otherwise we wouldn't be doing them justice. After all, how can you tell how well a game runs until you've seen it on the best machine available?

That's why we've turned to Emagen. Not just because they're able to keep working with an up to date PC to put the games through their paces, but also due to the fact that we're certain that they do the best system assembly in the business. Look at the picture below and you won't find a stray ATA cable or screw out of place. If you're serious about assembling the best machine you can, you'd do well to contact Emagen.

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- AMD Athlon XP 3000+
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RIGHT TO REPLY

Think we've treated a game unfairly? Or perhaps we've gone too easy on a game. Address your redress to pcga@derwenthoward.com.au or write to us via snail mail by sending your correspondence to Feedback, PC Games Addict, Derwent Howard, PO Box 1037, Bondi Junction, NSW 1355

GENRE: FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

BATTLEFIELD VIETNAM

Will the rock 'n' roll gunpocalypse provide EA with a second online masterpiece?

Using vegetation to hide is a very useful tactic.

BROTHERS IN COMBUSTION

The engine is the thrumming heart of many different creatures. The tank is one of these. The nimble scooter is another. Both provide ceaseless entertainment for those of a vehicular bent.

The butt of so many cruel jokes, this noble beast is a stalwart in the endless struggle of human insanity.

Used by the Italian Army to invade California in the little-know Sacramento invasion of 1973.

Particle effects decorate combat.

The flak cannons on this beast are dangerous to aircraft and infantry alike.

Incendiary

A well-known problem of game development, characterised by professional experts as 'The Sequential Success Conundrum', can be summed up thus: how much do you make your sequel like your previous, successful game? And how much do you change it in the name of progress? Difficult decisions must be made in long, sweaty meetings.

For the developers of this sequel to *Battlefield 1942* the answer was something along the lines of: "It has to be *exactly* the same, only different too, please." To their credit, Digital Illusions have managed to live up to this contradictory ambition fairly well. *Battlefield Vietnam* is no reinvention of the theme, as *Quake II* was of *Quake*; instead it's a little more (dare I say it?) like a glorified expansion pack. Ouch.

Ga-argh! Sorry. I'm *so* sorry to mar the review so early with this ugly comparison, but I'm afraid it's true. *Battlefield Vietnam* loses out for just one reason, and that reason is that it never feels like a genuine sequel. The quantum leap isn't quantum; evolution has not created a new phenotype. It's simply not different enough or inventive enough. It doesn't feel like the next generation of vehicular combat, it's simply another well-bred offspring from the current batch. The grumpy comparisons that some people have made with the various mods of the original *1942* are a little unfair, though – *Vietnam* adds masses of new toys for both players and mod-makers alike. This is very much the work of professionals, with lots of time having been spent on the really boring stuff that actually makes these games happen, like making a decent server-management interface, all-new mod tools, network code for better online play, as well as graphical and audio tweaking. More importantly perhaps is the fact that it remains

"The fact is that *Battlefield* is *brilliant*."

so enjoyable to play. This is a testament to the genius of the original design. The fact of the matter is that *Battlefield* is bloody *brilliant*.

This brilliance has made *Battlefield 1942* one of our favourite games of all time (*By 'all time', Jim means '2002'* – Hyperbole Censor). *Vietnam* follows this now-familiar model to the letter. The main achievement of both *Battlefield* games is that they enable beginners and expert players alike to jump into complex combat situations and have loads of fun from the very first moment they pull a trigger. Vehicles, be they aircraft or heavy armour, are extremely easy to use and infantry-level combat is equally easy to understand, with nods towards realism that don't impinge on the all-important fun-factor. On the larger scale of things the strategy is always easy to comprehend. Succeed in this action and you can reinforce your men from the point when you die and then live again. Vehicles pop up across the map and you can jump in and play. For many gamers, this is multi-player heaven.

Keeping the same feel and the same degree of ease and intuition in play is utterly essential for *Vietnam*'s success, but then so too is wowing us, making us pleased to have spent our money. How can *Vietnam* possibly hope to perform such a delicate balancing act?

Well to start with there's the new kit. We're talking M60s, claymores, caltrops, mortars, .44 revolvers and miscellaneous Chinese landmines. There's dynamite, heat-seeking missiles, rocket-propelled grenades and big old machetes to keep you amused. There are sniper rifles, double-barrelled flare launchers, sub-machineguns, continued over

HEAVY FOOTSTEPS

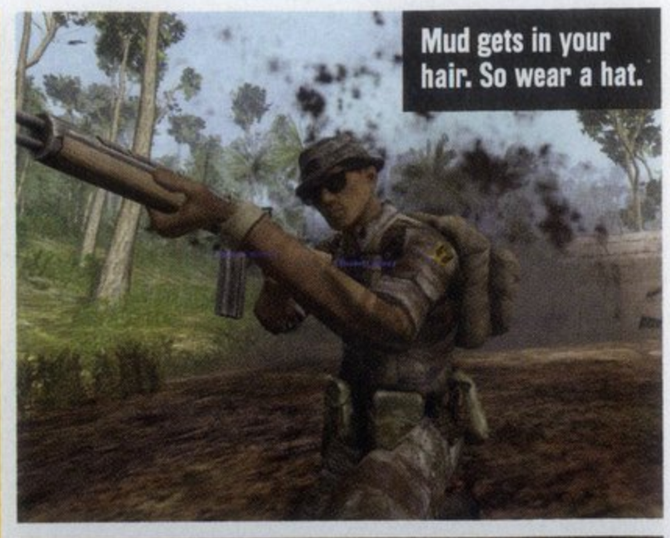
Players are able to throw themselves prone to avoid bullets, snipe and throw grenades. You can also shoot from the hip or from the shoulder for greater accuracy. But you'll also experience slightly different inertia depending on weapon weights. Everyone runs at the same speed, but heavy weapons people will accelerate more slowly to that speed. It's very subtle, but an interesting take on the subject.

THE BIG BAD BURN

Napalm. Nasty stuff by all accounts and yet in a game based on the Vietnam war you have to get it right. Not only is the horrific liquid fire a handy tactical weapon, it also can provide for some of the most spectacular moments.

All is quiet. The enemy have pulled back. HAHA! Capitalist cowards! But wait... what's that noise?

Sounds like... BOOM! The F4 delivers a payload of napalm right on top of the base. Nasty.



Mud gets in your hair. So wear a hat.

Rope bridges provide dangerous bottlenecks. Take to the water.

Safari, SE Asia style.

Someone's gonna pay...

TWO MILK BOTTLES, BLACK TAPE. ET VOILA!

Binoculars are a useful piece of kit that enables players to act as 'spotters'. Get to a vantage point and scan the map – any enemies you see through your binoculars will appear on your team-mates' maps. Could this prove to be a useful tactic for *Battlefield* commanders? Or will it be deemed a bit on the cheaty side?

M16 carbines, disposable anti-tank rockets, shotguns, Ak-47s and grenade-launchers painted with tiger stripes. *You* can be The Roach from *Apocalypse Now*: "He's close, man. He's real close... Mother(*trucker* – Ed)."

Yes, *Apocalypse Now* outshines all the other Vietnam films, doesn't it? The madness, the violence, the music. In fact, there's one map in *Battlefield Vietnam* that could have been called the *Apocalypse Now* map. But... we'll come to that later on.

There are some tactical changes that really make a difference to the way the game plays out. The kit-selections mean you can be a heavy-support chap, a sniper/scout, an engineer or a standard rifle-carrying assault trooper. The medic is now significantly absent. Interestingly, there are also some dynamic spawn points that can be placed across the map, with deployable foxholes for the Vietcong and helicopter-dropped supply crates for the US troopers. These will certainly add new tactics to play and one of the scenarios *Battlefield Vietnam* offers is based around the Vietcong using their foxholes in the jungle to bag the US-dominated jungle capture-points. This is just one tool that *Battlefield Vietnam* uses to balance the technological might of the US against the Vietnamese guerrilla forces.

Of course the best way to balance these forces is via the implementation of loads of new vehicles. There's a slight lack of realism in their distribution across the two sides, with the Vietnamese having access to lashings of Chinese and Soviet hardware for their war. This means that it's not just the US players who get to play with helicopters.

"Board the helicopter and fire M60s."

Ah, sweet helicopters. Flying has been reinvented for *Battlefield Vietnam* and the helicopters are highly manoeuvrable and relatively easy to control. Of course you'll still end up looking embarrassingly clumsy as you pitch your Huey into the jungle the first few times you fly, but once you get the hang of it, you *are* the Air Cav. Players can board the helicopter with you and fire M60s from either side. Or, if you're flying the Russian-built Hind, you can expect half a dozen parachutists to want to be deployed over the strategic areas of the battlefield. Both helicopter types boast rockets too, which makes for formidable air support. Even more exciting is the possibility of being able to airlift vehicles around the map (see 'Winches, Boats and Choppers' for more).

In fact the US forces slightly dominate the game's aerial aspect, employing Chinooks and B-52s to back up the Hueys and F4s that roar across the battlefields with impressive agility. The Vietcong fight back with the Mig-17 and the Mig-21, but more impressive still are their anti-air capabilities. They field both the Russian ZSU anti-aircraft tank and infantry-launched heat-seeking missiles. The skies are dangerous.

But never as dangerous as the ground, which plays host to an incredible array of death-mechanisms to feed you that final meal of shrapnel and lead. There are Russian T-54s and Patton tanks churning up mud and lobbing shells in each other's direction. There are Jeeps and APCs and mortars. There are dozens of other shooty machines, including incredibly over-the-top artillery. Play with these when you've got 5.1 sound

WINCHES, BOATS AND CHOPPERS

The coolness of helicopters is self-evident. *Battlefield Vietnam* increases this by allowing you do stuff like this. Incredibly, tanks can still fire while being airlifted, much to the amusement of tank-boys and the frightened squeals of chopper pilots.

Use your voice binds to call down one of these giant mechanical hummingbirds. But don't get close to its teeth.

The impregnation of boat by helicopter results in a unique creature: the hovercraft, strange fruit of air and water.

Aiiiiee! Flying through the air with the greatest of unease. Pilots need to be careful, as this presents an easy target...

...and carelessness leads to scenes like this. It's always a shame. So much potential in those young men...

Lay down suppressing fire before you get capped.

Pose and shoot for Rambo effect.

RPGs mean soldiers can cause havoc for tanks.

and a big old subwoofer hooked up and you really know about it. Better still, a welcome favourite makes a return to a number of the maps: the Vespa-style scooter. While not particularly heavily armed, there is little more enjoyable than hurtling through villages, dodging explosions and harrying invading GIs as your Kalashnikov-wielding passenger shoots wildly from the back seat. Within minutes of play we were already zooming across bridges in this little beast, vast walls of fire billowing behind us as aircraft blitzed the village behind us. Ace.

Another impressive addition is that of boats. These range from the plastic motorised patrol-boats of the US Marines, to the wooden fishing rafts of the Vietnamese villagers. Many of the maps are set around coastal areas or swampy inlets and the boats can provide invaluable transport to attack bases further upriver. These boats are loads of fun, especially if you want to do sneaky manoeuvres on the larger maps. And it's the larger maps that provide the best experience of battle. They're varied and highly detailed, with as many open highland areas as dense vegetation and jungle. The smaller maps are good for urban combat and suchlike, but interiors and shattered buildings are not where *Battlefield Vietnam*'s strengths lie. The real inspiration is to be found on the Ho Chi Minh trail or the scrubland lagoons. The chaos of 20 or more people on each team trying to fight for a small, swampy island is an invigorating experience indeed.

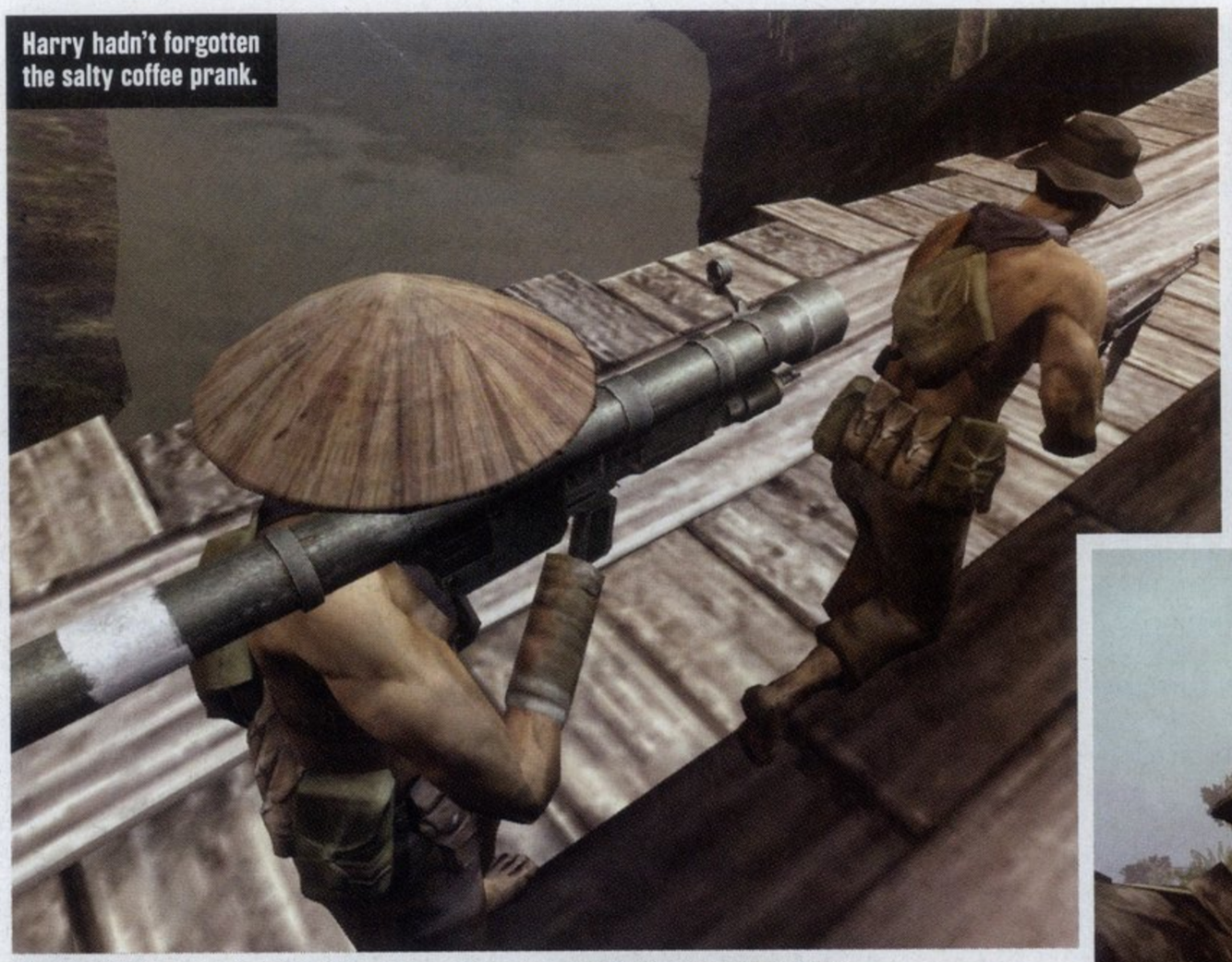
"Inspiration is to be found on the Ho Chi Minh Trail."

But there's another trick up the flared sleeves of this rock 'n' roll conflict: music. And I'm not just talking about the instrumental version of White Rabbit that dominates the options screen, either. Music has actually been implemented into the game itself, so that every vehicle has a radio and that radio can be heard beyond the vehicle cockpit. This means if the Marines in the Jeep that races past are listening to Wild Thing then you'll be able to hear it too. This adds enormously to the feel of this actually being a Vietnam experience: lashings of atmosphere are endowed on the proceedings by this single concept. It's obviously a cheap trick, but an effective one. Hell, you'll be smoking Thai marijuana and making 'Charlie don't surf' quips before you know it. The soundtrack includes The Kinks 'You Really Got Me' and 'All Day and All of the Night', Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit' and 'Somebody to Love', Deep Purple's 'Hush', Bobby Fuller's 'I Fought the Law', Edwin Starr's 'War (What is it Good For?)' and of course, Wagner's 'The Ride of the Valkyries'. This selection of music really adds weight to the Hollywood interpretation of the '60s and '70s that you'd expect from a game made by this generation of people. People for whom this is entertainment. People like us, who were actually nothing to do with the savage atrocity of one of the most appalling conflicts of all time. Hmm.

Anyway, what all this adds up to is the pre-surfing assault scene from *Apocalypse Now*: yes, you can *actually* participate in the Air Cavalry's Wagner-fuelled attack on the beach-base, complete with continued over

DOWN THE BARREL

The infantry experience has been improved over that of *BF1942*'s, with the 'looking down the gun' trick for better accuracy in firing having been improved a good deal. It looks better, it feels more realistic and the characters automatically slow to a walk when they're firing from the shoulder. Small tweaks like this add a fair bit to the overall effect. We like it.



Harry hadn't forgotten the salty coffee prank.

SYSTEM MISER

How *Battlefield Vietnam* will play on *your* PC

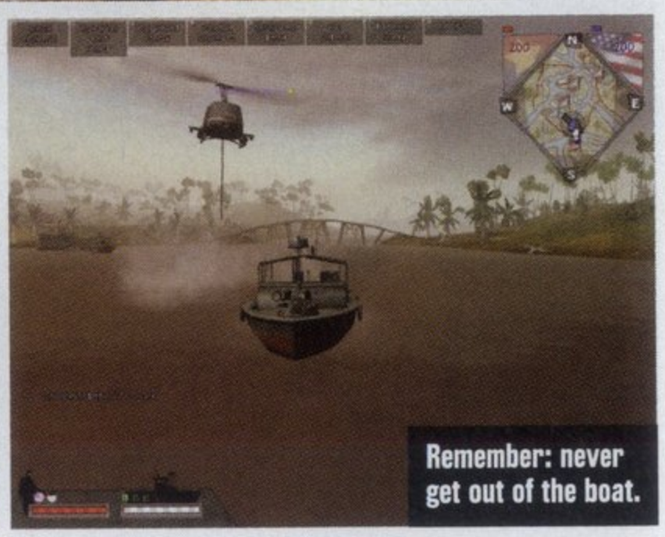
- Supported resolutions: **640x480 up to 1600x1200**
- Scaleable options: **Textures, geometry, view distance.**

VERDICT: **This is the clincher, really. *Vietnam* needs a big, powerful PC, with loads of RAM. Although EA are happy to say 128Mb RAM on the box, we'd balk at taking it on with anything less than 512Mb under our belts. Older graphics cards will also struggle to shift the polys, so GeForce 3 or better for you, GI. 1Gb of RAM and a GeForce FX are what we'd recommend, though.**

Weapon and player models are more detailed than ever.

Ride the scooter to the pub for cool-points.

He's not happy about something.



Remember: never get out of the boat.

PCGA PROFILE

Battlefield Vietnam is:
- **Devoid of atrocity**
- **Familiar territory**
- **Hollywood thinking**

Battlefield Vietnam is not:
- **Hugely innovative**
- **Robin Williams**
- **Marlon Brando**

opera blaring from the speakers and somebody in an F4 laying napalm down on the tree-line beyond. Boom. Incredible. Glorious. Silly too, and reeking of a strangely moving machismo. This kind of escapism is what PC gaming seems to have become all about. Of course, once you're in-game it's unlikely to go entirely the US team's way, as the Vietcong have plenty of weapons to defend themselves with. Aside from the guns and vehicles we've already mentioned, they have traps aplenty, including deployable stake-pits and giant Ewok-style rolling log traps. So very cool.

Of course I've been discussing this all in the manner in which it's meant to be played – as a multi-player game. But there's more to be found in the single-player version. The instant action and campaign maps have been augmented by a challenge mode where you must undertake extra-curricular missions to complete the objectives, including such delights as getting a certain number of headshots, or running a certain number of people over with a Vespa. The limited ability to customise the appearance of your player model is increased by unlocking these single-player bonuses. This was never meant to be a single-player game, but if you must, it's there.

In the world beyond the servers, political quibbling seems likely to arise once again as controversial wars make for more fun gaming but, putting that aside entirely, we're still left with the best Vietnam war game so far. It's also one of the best online multi-player games of recent times. The fact that *Battlefield Vietnam* does seem to hark towards territory normally covered by free mods or expansion packs means that a few people will wince at buying this at full price. But then we also believe that there is enough in the way of new toys and new gaming experiences to make this a worthwhile investment of money and your precious time.

I paraphrase my distinguished colleague Mr Edwards when I say that this is one game that you won't really care if you miss out on, but also a game that you'll definitely be glad of if you do decide to make it your next adventure behind a gun. Put that paradox in your pipe and smoke it.

JIM ROSSIGNOL

■ Publisher **EA** ■ Developer **Digital Illusions** ■ Minimum System **PIII 900, 128Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card** ■ Recommended **P4 1.5GHz, 512Mb RAM, GeForce 3** ■ Multi-Player **64 players, internet, LAN** ■ Web Address **www.eagames.com/official/battlefield/vietnam/us/home.jsp** ■ Release Date **26th March**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

PlanetSide
Still not perfect, one expansion pack later. Nevertheless incredible and unique.

Halo
A favourite. Can the PC Games Addict office ever be beaten at lunchtime *Halo*? No.

PC GAMES addict
The methods are not unsound, and there is no battle horror here. A worthy sequel.

82%

GENRE: FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

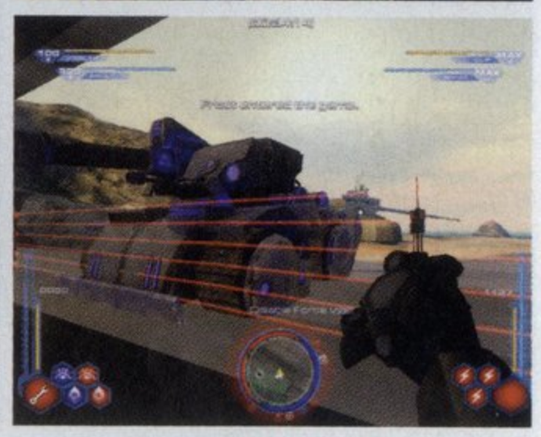
UNREAL II
EXPANDED MULTIPLAYER

Did a new multi-player extension rescue *Unreal II* from obscurity?

The jam-powered Raptor.

When two tanks go to war.

I'll squish him on the next pass.



CLASS ACTION

By far the most rewarding character to play is the Tech, because you can take a time-out from the conflict to lay down traps and machinegun nests for the enemy. When the crossfire obliterates an opposing team, relocate the turrets and move on. Mobility is the key to surprise.

PCGA PROFILE

XMP is:
- **Free**
- **Class Based**
- **Extra!**

XMP is not:
- **Capture the Flag**
- **A stand-alone game**
- **Extravagant**

LET'S begin with the history. ***Unreal II* was not an excellent game. Among its perceived faults was the lack of a multi-player mode – one more gripe in the community's list of demands. To remedy this, developers Legend have ducked back under the parapet and offered *XMP*: a mod that bolts on to the original game code, and adds a team-based, Capture the Flag derivative.**

Your goal is to capture four artefacts. There are two major complications: energy and vehicles. Each team has a base, equipped with static defence turrets, and in addition, certain classes of players can lay down further turrets, land mines, laser-activated explosives and the occasional healing station. None of these toys run on willpower alone. You need to be in control of generators dotted around the middle ground. He who controls the power, controls the game. You can do without it, but you can't do *well*.

The vehicles are absurdly clunky. Three have been included in this release: the Raptor jeep with a flesh-mashing pair of circular grinders mounted on the front; the Juggernaut, a ridiculous, over-the-top tank; and the Harbinger, a VW bus with a mortar bolted to the roof-rack. Their handling is clumsy and they fail to live up to their initial promise. Don't expect *Halo*'s or *Battlefield 1942*'s levels of chaotic hilarity.

Grower

"We need more power! Laser fences in danger!"

The maps included are distinguished by wide-open spaces where snipers can dominate. A firm favourite is 'xmp-freefall', set within an enormous asteroid belt. In a nod to *Tribes*, each player is equipped with a jetpack, and can bound from one spinning rock to another. But most levels are drab, cod sci-fi efforts that take little advantage of the *Unreal* engine's possibilities. The scale of the environments is another drawback – you'll spend more time hiking to your next objective than attacking or defending.

The only instruction you receive is an online tutorial, screen after screen of spoken text. In-game, the announcer screams at you to fix this, retrieve that. "Energy low! We need more power! Laser fences in danger!" You try to solve the problems, but you don't understand how they're caused, let alone how they're fixed.

For anyone who still owns a copy of *Unreal II*, this mod is a no-brainer. It's free, mostly enjoyable, download fodder. An online snack to munch between games. Just don't think about buying a copy of *Unreal II* to play this. *RTCW: Enemy Territory* has a wider range of support; is also free and already has an enormous following. Nevertheless, kudos to Legend for releasing it. Don't look a gift Juggernaut in the mouth.

TIM EDWARDS

■ Publisher **Atari** ■ Developer **Legend** ■ Minimum System **PIII 733, 256Mb RAM, 32Mb GeForce 2 MX, Unreal II** ■ Recommended **PIII 1.2GHz, 384Mb RAM, 64Mb GeForce 3**
■ Multi-Player **LAN, internet** ■ Web Address **www.unreal2.com** ■ Release Date **Downloadable now**

PC GAMES addict
An essential download for *Unreal II* owners. Everyone else should move along.
70%

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

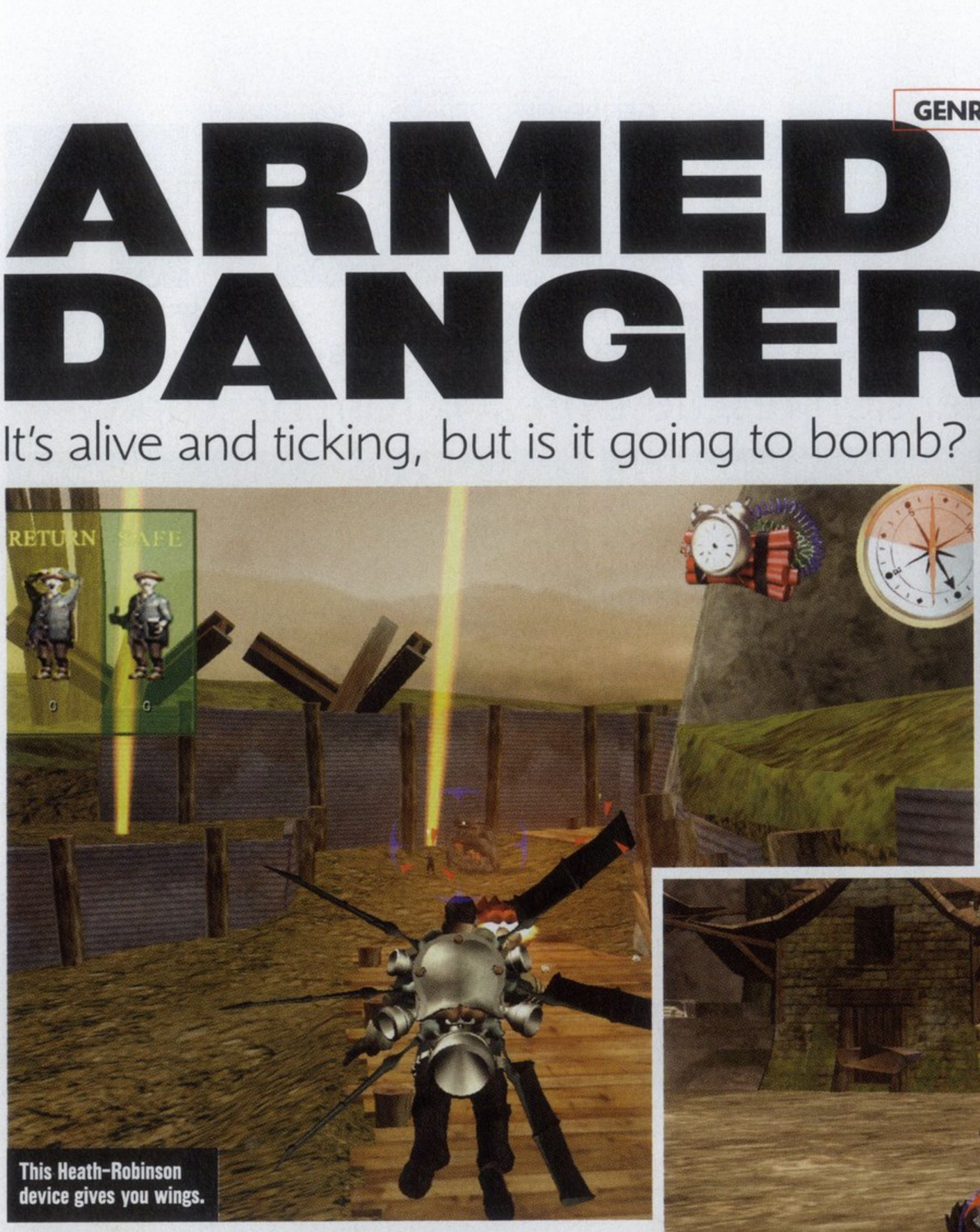
PlanetSide
The same principles extended across a persistent world. Incredible.

Enemy Territory
The definitive *Team Fortress* variant. Available for free, online.

GENRE: THIRD-PERSON ACTION

ARMED AND DANGEROUS

It's alive and ticking, but is it going to bomb?



This Heath-Robinson device gives you wings.

It's best not to get this close to grunts, but I thought you'd like to have a good look.

DOWN THE BOOZER

Tucked away in many of the levels is a pub. Booze, however, is not your goal at this establishment, but weaponry, provided by the peasant resistance movement, and a welcome refill of health points. It's here that the more unusual weapons can be found (see 'Armed and Very Dangerous'). In one of many such nice touches, there's always a comedic clip of dialogue when you enter the pub screen, typically involving the, erm, love between man and sheep.

HUMOUR is a powerful thing. We subconsciously try to be around people who make us laugh. We seek out comedy. Laughter, the boffins have proved, is actually good for you. Much of the film and television industries are geared towards humour. So why is it I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of PC games that have made comedy their raison d'etre in the last five years?

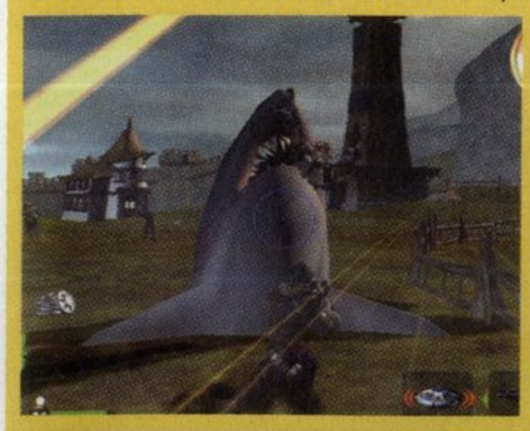
For trying to be funny, then, *Armed and Dangerous* earns points. It also earns points for actually *succeeding* in being funny. This is either a freakish coincidence, since Planet Moon's previous game, *Giants*, was also funny, or it's all down to the hard work of a small gang of cooped-up comedians they have shackled in the cellar who are regularly tapped for comedy-juice by their cruel captors, like human rubber trees. I suspect the latter, because *Armed and Dangerous*' humour is very similar to *Giants*' in its range, tone and references. This is *Giants 2* in all but name (but, um, without any giants. Hence the different name).

Instead, you take control of the Lionhearts, a rag-tag foursome of mercenaries, in a strange land. To be more precise, you take control of their leader Roman; tea-drinking robot Q and Scots mole Jonesy tag along on many missions, but you have minimal control over their actions. They, along with fourth member (and comic relief) Rexus and other non-player characters, make their presence felt in the cut-scenes which precede most of the 20-odd missions.

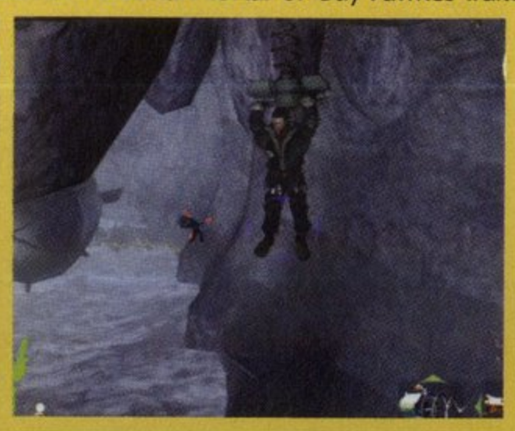
These cut-scenes, despite inexplicably poor visual quality, offer a very British kind of humour (although Planet Moon are based in the US) which veers from Pythonesque surrealism to more standard crudeness, expressed through visual gags and heavily accented japery. The vocal talent is top-quality, and matched by the comic timing of the animations; in short, these video interludes are as good as *Giants*'. Few games can get away with the kind of scene in which the diminutive, blind Rexus attempts to sew the leg back onto the King's son Stig, but is let down by his vocabulary and instead orders the scalpel-armed Q to "make a circumcision". Or when he hypnotises two enemy soldiers into believing they're French, whereupon they run away. Or when he misunderstands a

ARMED AND VERY DANGEROUS

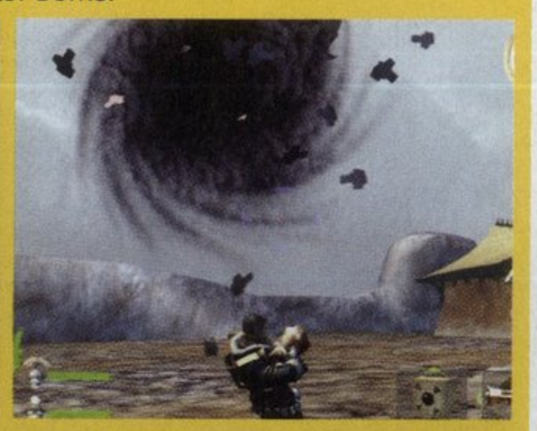
This game offers the most imaginative tools of destruction we've seen since *No One Lives Forever 2*. And we don't even have room for the Vindaloo Rocket Launcher, Gurner Personal Mortar or Guy Fawkes Traitor Bomb.



The Land Shark Gun. Released from the gun, the shark 'swims' underground, surfacing beneath enemies and devouring them spectacularly.

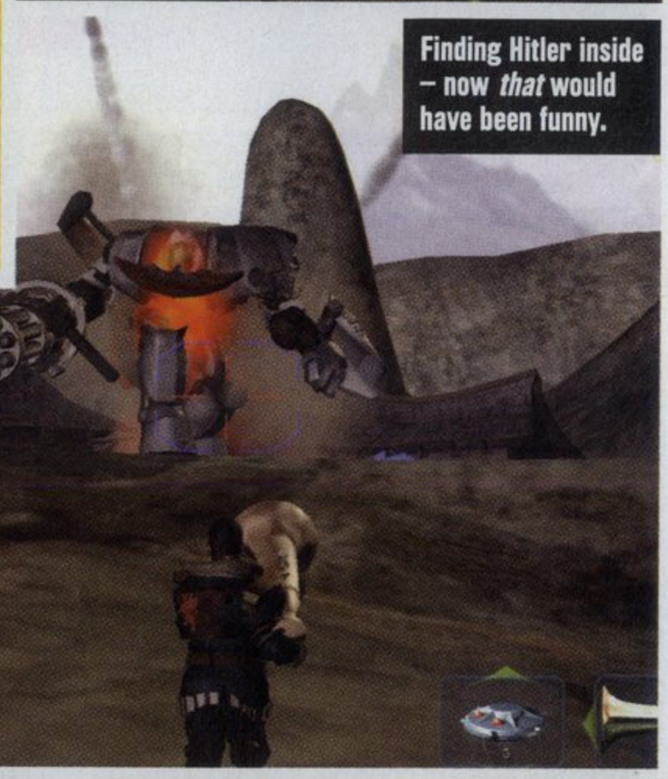


The Topsy Turvy Bomb momentarily flips the area upside down. Enemies fall into the sky, then plummet back to earth with a shuddering splat.



The World's Smallest Black Hole is exactly that. Open the cardboard box to inflict a black hole on your enemies, and cackle as they're sucked into oblivion.

The Land Shark gun in effect.



Finding Hitler inside – now *that* would have been funny.

One of the mission types demands that you return kidnapees to their homes.

Evil? Or just misunderstood?

Disarming

Russian-accented gate guard, who wants "keys", so he snogs him: "Give me another chance! It's been a long time since I kissed a man!" You get the picture.

The surreal land in which the Lionhearts quest labours under cruel King Forge, whose troops are repressing the peasants. Our brave heroes are caught up in a mission to retrieve the Book of Rule, a magical artefact which confers great power, from King Forge, and thereby liberate the populace. Of course, because the Book has been stolen, it's turned itself into a book on basket-weaving, and only the Lionhearts can make the prophecy come to pass. Or something. Each level introduces a new bit of the kingdom, from villages to open plains, ravines and mountains, across which you must battle the king's troops. Humble villagers along the way offer assistance, require help or demand that tasks be done; no opportunity for comedy is missed.

For the majority of most of the levels, you're simply controlling Roman, mowing down grunt after grunt with the standard machinegun. It's not so much that there's no variety, but rather that the novel bits seem tacked on. The main conceit, for example, that Roman is usually accompanied by Q

"It's been a long time since I kissed a man..."

and Jonesy, is a damp squib. They're not particularly effective in combat, using only fairly basic weapons, and won't actively seek out the health packs dropped by some fallen enemies, although they can be directed to hold certain areas. Further, when they're 'killed' they simply disappear from the battlefield, to reappear in the next cut-scene and level as though nothing happened. If their occasional one-line interjections had been expanded to form mid-level, in-engine cut-scenes, their presence outside the main cut-scenes would have been justified. As it is, Q and Jonesy only offer a little comic relief and help prod the storyline.

Environmental variety livens things up, thankfully, even if your actual activity (run, shoot, dodge) rarely changes. With the addition of the Jumper Pack in certain levels, and objectives including taking out specific enemies or destroying marked buildings, the game strays into large-scale platformer territory. Rescuing imprisoned peasants is a diverting task on several levels, and occasionally involves destroying behemoth-like creatures. But the levels are inevitably padded out by having to shoot grunt after grunt, and the limited

continued over

WHO GIVES YOU EXTRA?

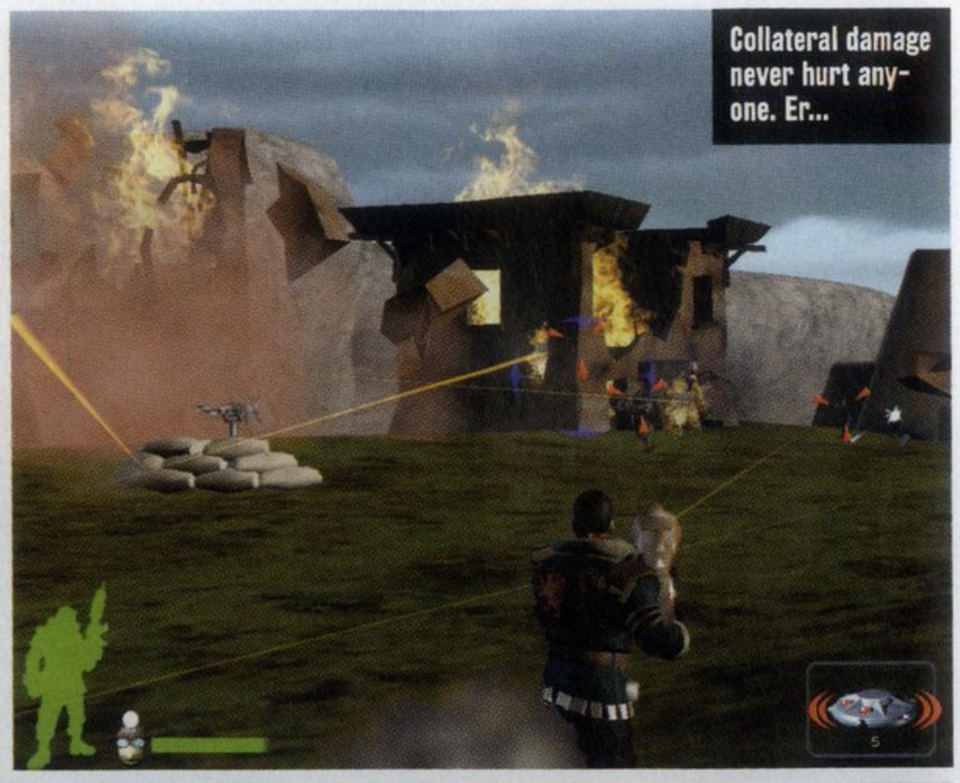
Just as owners of the Xbox version can download new levels through Live!, additional missions will also become available for the PC version. According to publishers Activision, these will be different to the Xbox ones, but will presumably also take place after the conclusion of the game's story. We'll aim to get them on our cover discs soon.

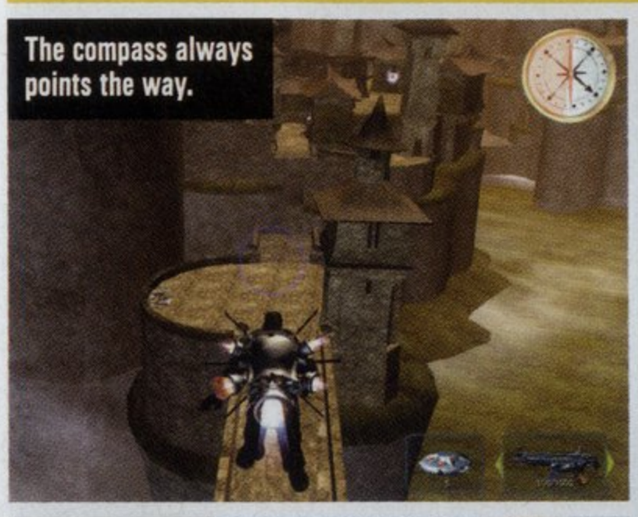
SCENE STEALER

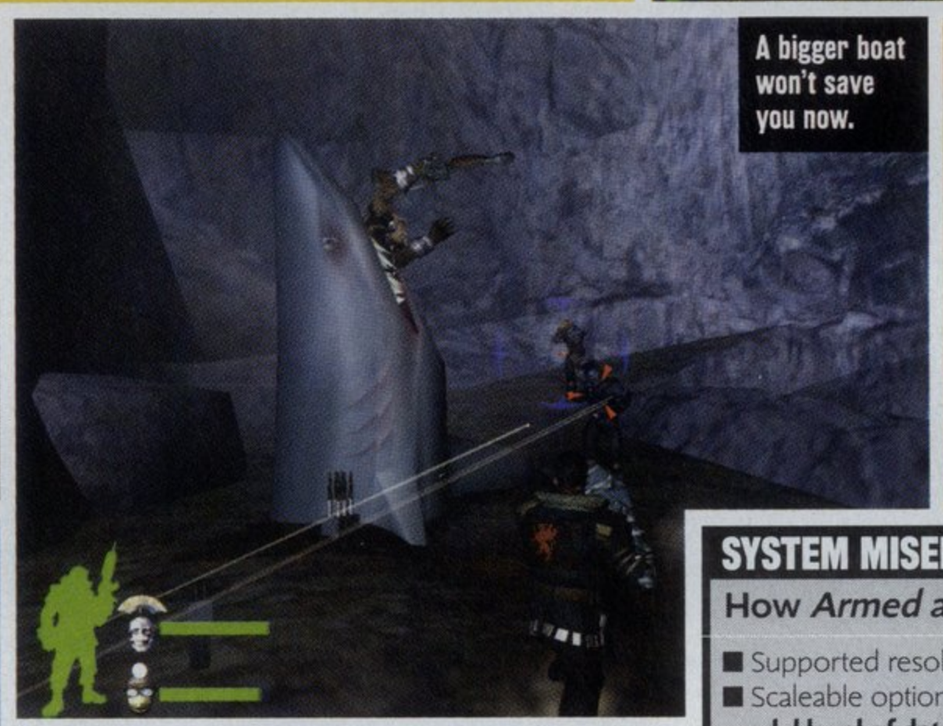
It's the cut-scenes that really show off Planet Moon's undeniable writing and animation abilities.

The Lionhearts meet Lily, a peasant girl at the centre of the prophecy. With hilarious results!

Rexus kisses a man. From sheep-interfering to testicle size, puerile humour is a default weapon.







SYSTEM MISER

How *Armed and Dangerous* will play on *your* PC

- Supported resolutions: **640x480 up to 1600x1200**
- Scaleable options: **16/32-bit colour, texture quality, texture and model level of detail, number of textures, draw distance, more.**

VERDICT: **The vast installation aside, *AaD* is a little more demanding than its pretty but unspectacular visuals would suggest. The minimum spec copes fine with the options above turned down, but a low draw distance means you'll be sniped by invisible enemies. A feature-packed graphics card – a decent GeForce 4 or equivalent – will gobble up all these demands happily.**

PCGA PROFILE

Armed and Dangerous is:
- **Funny**
- **A rarity as such**
- **Short**

Armed and Dangerous is not:
- **As good as we'd hoped**
- **A perfect mix**
- **Just another shooter**

availability of special weapons and their ammunition means these entertaining toys can't be used as freely as you'd like.

Set-pieces serve to liven things up somewhat, particularly towards the end of the game when your three-hundredth grunt doesn't quite have the spark of the first few, even if they do still get blown up with satisfying animation sequences or run away screaming when hit with a sticky bomb. Freeing kidnapped peasants from cages on the back of huge creatures through the judicious use of dynamite, shooting down zeppelins which threaten a village with paratroopers, and several defend-the-village scenes which strap you into a turret all offer a change of perspective.

However, they're ultimately just a different shade of grey to the rest of the game's greyness. *Armed and Dangerous*' real problem is that it lacks a coherent sense of structure and reward. You're required to follow the path, kill the enemies, destroy their buildings and so on, but there's little sense of reason for your actions. This is only exacerbated by the feeling that the cut-scenes play out independently of – and can't be affected by – the action. By the end of the game I found myself ploughing through the levels just to see the next clip.

"Few games can get away with this kind of scene."

The surreal nature of the world translates well into the cut-scenes, but identikit barracks plonked into cardboard villages, respawning enemies and the permanent combat alertness of the baddies become tiresome after just a few levels.

Laughter, they say, is the best medicine. *Armed and Dangerous*' very funny segues and imaginative characters are certainly the tonic to its repetitive core. Perhaps time constraints resulted in cut features and the disappointingly short length; certainly it's rare for a game to go from announcement to release in seven months, beating the time *Giants* took by several years. Planet Moon certainly haven't lost their sense of humour, but it's disappointing to see the fruits of their genius framed by inferior action.

ROSS ATHERTON

■ Publisher **Activision/LucasArts** ■ Developer **Planet Moon** ■ Minimum System **PIII 1GHz, 256Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card with T&L, 4.5Gb HD space** ■ Recommended **P4 1.6GHz, 64Mb 3D card**
■ Multi-Player **None** ■ Web Address **www.lucasarts.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

PC GAMES addict

A rare gem of true comedy, brought to earth with a bump by lacklustre action.

75%

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Giants
Planet Moon's last title, now on budget. And you still haven't bought it, have you?

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A solid shooter enlivened by judicious use of humour throughout its story and action.

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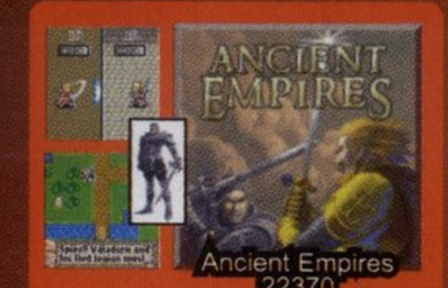

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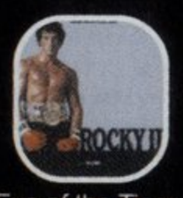

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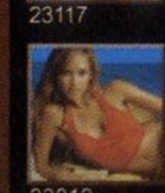
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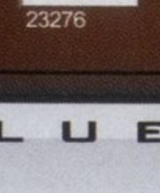
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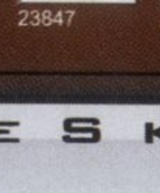
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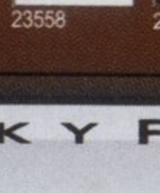

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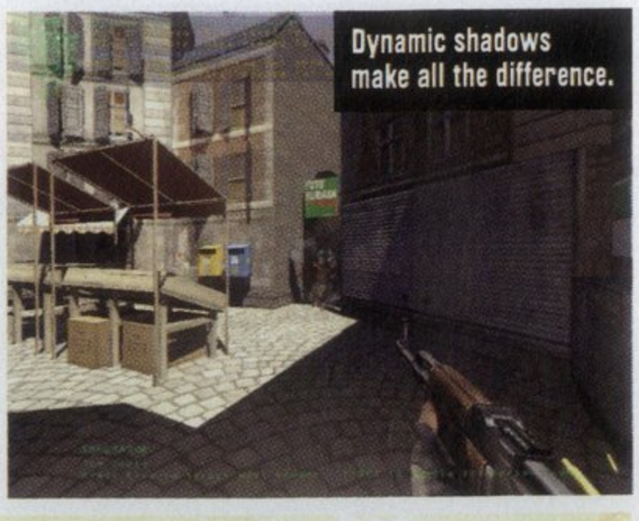
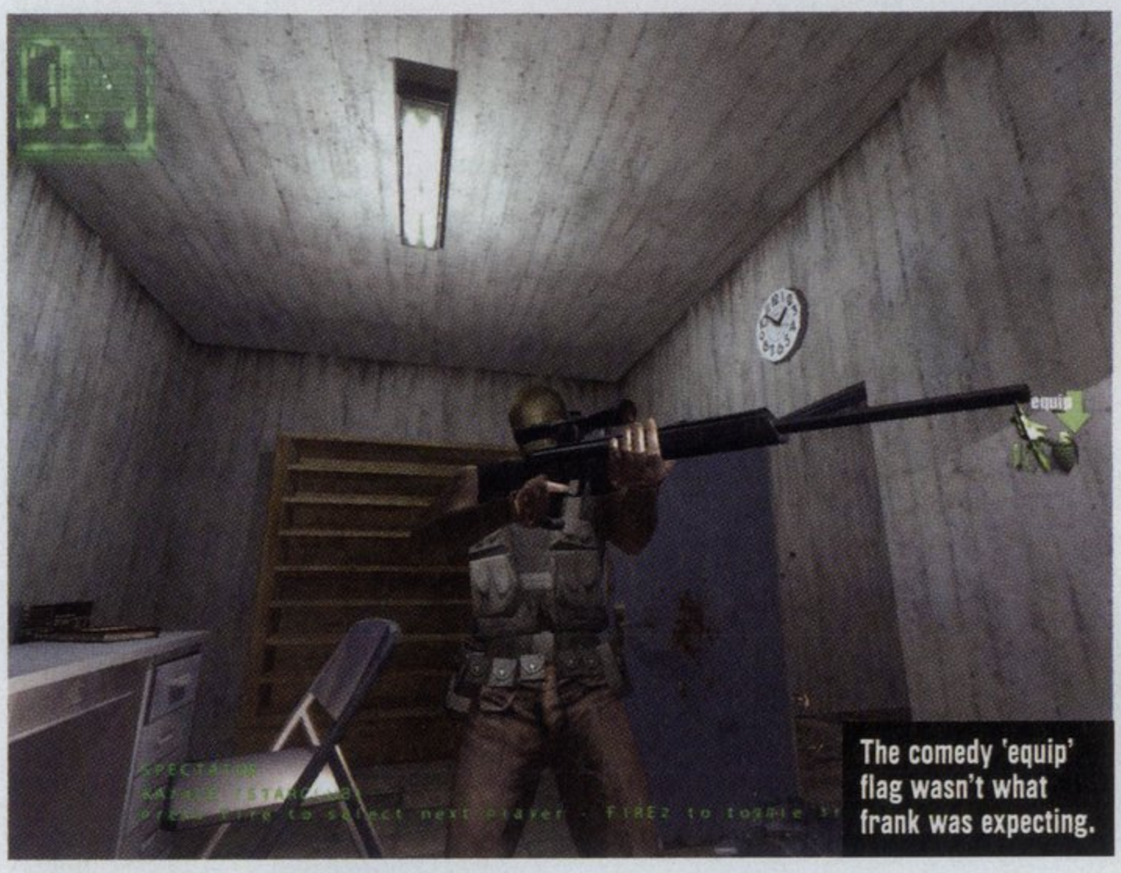
GENRE: FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

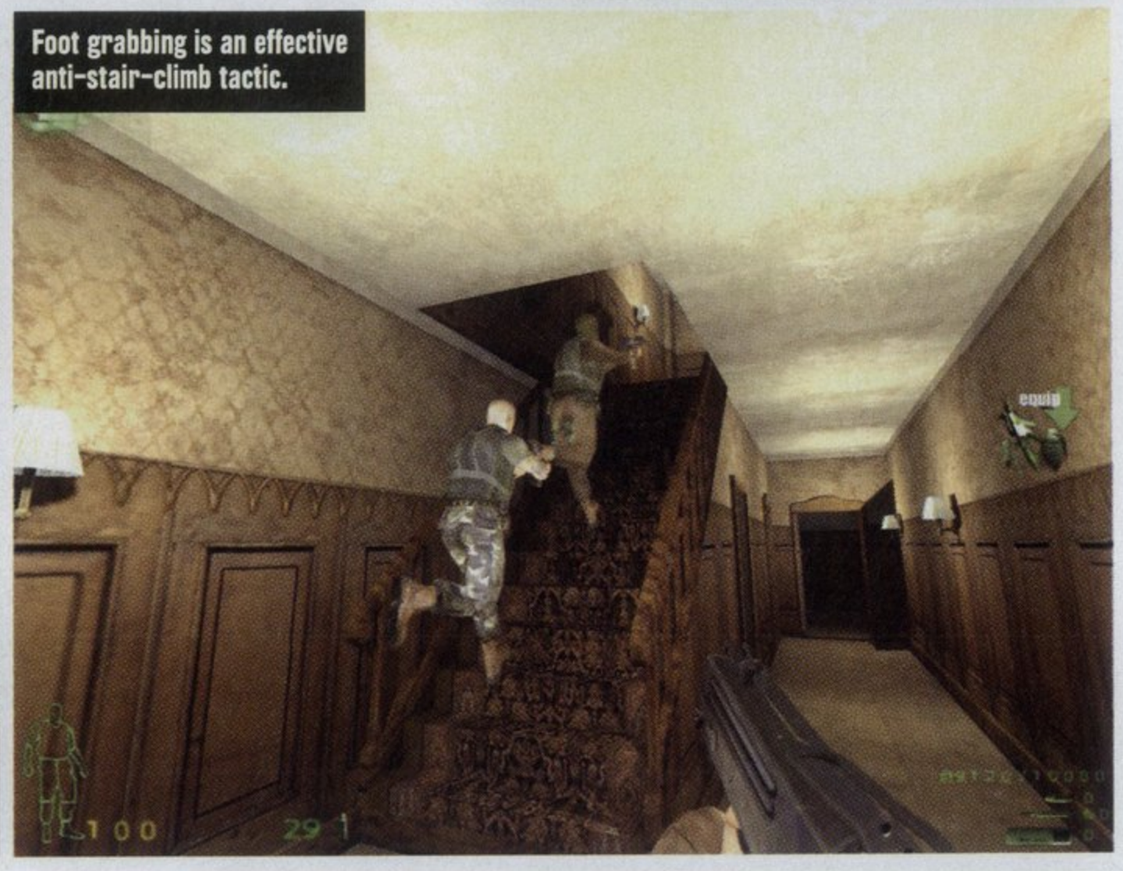
NEW WORLD ORDER

Please allow 28 days for delivery.


Dynamic shadows make all the difference.



The comedy 'equip' flag wasn't what frank was expecting.



Foot grabbing is an effective anti-stair-climb tactic.

Revolting

LET'S get this out of the way from the start: *Counter-Strike*. There, I've said it. *New World Order* is a lot like *Counter-Strike*. OK? I could spend this entire review enumerating the ways that *NWO* has ripped off (sorry, 'been *inspired* by') *CS* because this unashamed clone is practically nothing else.

Structurally it's identical. Two teams, one terrorist and one police. Bomb defusing, hostage rescue and escape missions, AKs, Augs, flashbangs, the lot. It's a *CS* sale and everything must go, go, go! You're instantly struck by how uncannily familiar it sounds and feels. Anyone who never saw the inside of a lecture theatre for *de_dust* (it's a popular a *CS* map, for the rest of you) will instantly recognise any number of *CS* facsimiles, from the 'get me outta here' hiss of the hostages to the tense, juxtaposed pace of stealthy movement and sudden fire-fight.

Visually, *NWO* appears to move away from *CS*. Dynamic shadows and per-pixel lighting make it look very modern and stylish. But you can make anything look good with per-pixel shading. After the initial dazzle wears off you begin to see through *NWO*'s glitz. Guns poke through walls, leg animations scrabble around like Wyle E Coyote on marbles and hey, those melons are square! It's then that you realise there's no real polish in the game, only a thick, glossy coat of varnish.

"Bots that run at you – off the edge of a cliff."

Guns are available according to rank, but even that's half-inched from *America's Army*. You begin each map with only a few weapon types available; the better you fare, the more weapons become available. You 'fare better' by killing enemies, planting bombs and rescuing hostages. But even that's not very different from the system in *CS* – after all, they've just replaced money with points. Nearly had me there. Unlike *CS*, however, you can't pick up weapons that you don't have the points to buy. This means that if one side gets a couple of good rounds in they suddenly start cracking open G-36s and miniguns that the other side can't use. Perhaps it's unfair to start bashing the game for being unlike *CS* after a whole review of bashing it because it is, but if you're going to rob a game wholesale you should bloody well take the bits that work.

There's a single-player 'story' mode but it's only the same handful of arenas from online play. And you're fighting the same collection of mindless bots again, the kind that run toward you off the edge of cliffs and line up to be shot. The scenario becomes an irrelevant collection of objects to hide behind and nothing more.

It'd be wrong to say that *New World Order* is *CS* with a lick of paint because it's so much less than that. Fancy lighting can't hide the fact that it lacks the elegance and polish of the game it's trying to be. The world is finally moving on from *CS* anyway, so why look back?

JAMES CAREY

DEJA VU

We were told that *New World Order* had 'gone gold' back in November of 2002 and that a release was imminent. Yet here we are at the beginning of 2004. Time for some idle speculation. Under all that shiny per-pixel shading and those dynamic shadows, *NWO* is basically quite plain. Hmm, now how long would lighting afterthoughts like these take to implement? A year, maybe?

PCGA PROFILE

New World Order is:
- **Well lit**
- **Playable**
- ***Counter-Strike*-a-like**

New World Order is not:
- ***Counter-Strike***
- **Fresh**
- **Polished**

■ Publisher **Project 3 Interactive** ■ Developer **Termite Studios** ■ Minimum System **PIII 600, 256Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card** ■ Recommended **1.4GHz, 512Mb RAM, 128Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **Online, LAN, up to 32** ■ Web Address **www.p3int.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Counter-Strike
Still going strong among cyberathlete professionals, kids, and little in between.

Rainbow Six Raven Shield
The closest thing to *NWO* in terms of looks but infinitely more tactical and invloving.

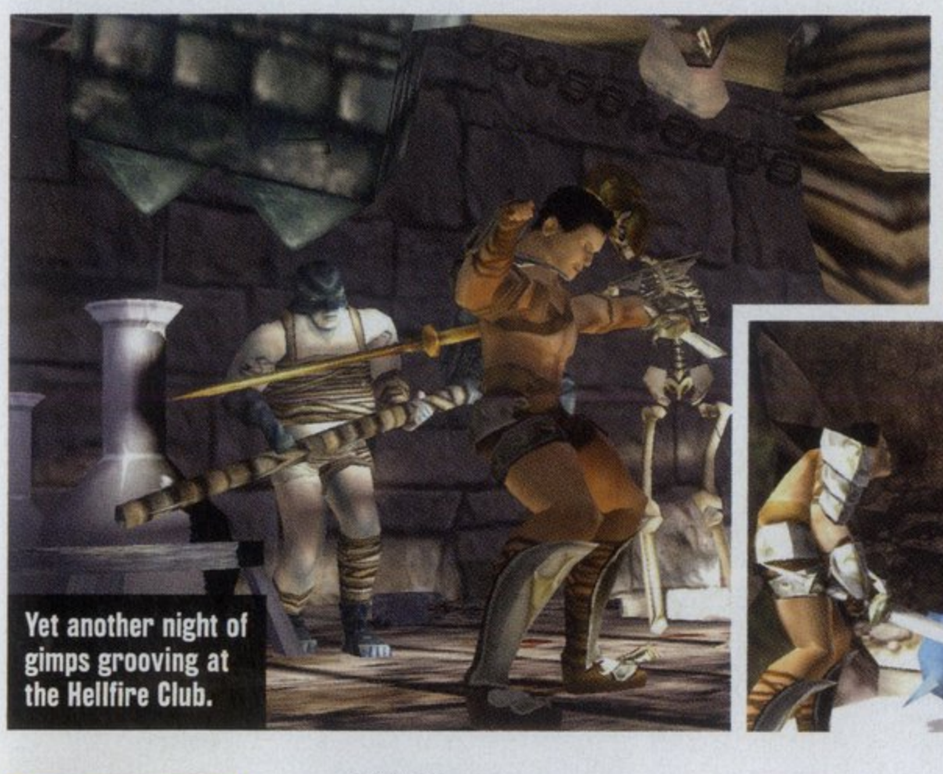
PC GAMES addict
You can never go back, as Max once said to The Navigator. And he was right.

55%

GENRE: THIRD-PERSON ACTION

GLADIATOR
SWORD OF VENGEANCE

The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.



Yet another night of gimps grooving at the Hellfire Club.

That alien from Predator is *toast* without his armour.

Crowesfeet

LIVING in this beautiful utopian future, we now share many games across the old boundaries of platform. From *Deus Ex: Invisible War* to *Knights of the Old Republic*, from *GTA* to *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, the very best titles now proudly straddle fences. This has put a timely end to those complaints about certain games being clearly 'for consoles', rather than for PCs. Thank goodness. But having said all that, *Gladiator* is *such* a console game.

The emperor Trajan is dead, and now some Caesar-a-like called Arruntius is in charge. He's not so hot, and in order to win over the affections of his citizens he organises the biggest damn gladiatorial contest they ever saw. So there's your game, right? Wrong. Forming only the training levels, the conclusion of said contest sees the death of our heroic player character, Invictus Thrax, at the wrathful fingers of demon gods Phobos and Deimos. It's upon waking up in Elysium, to the mocking tones of Romulus and Remus, that the game proper begins its nonsensical meanderings.

You are granted the opportunity to re-enter the world, so long as you kill off all the beasties left behind by the baddie gods, by the means of the rarely loved Silly Arcade Beat-'em-Up Technique. Indeed, reminiscent of console games gone by, combat is achieved through a frenzied assault on (ideally) joypad buttons or (unrealistically) a pair of ill-fated keyboard keys. These are backed up by a Magic button, and the ambiguously implemented 'Context Action' button.

"Kill all the beasties left by the baddie gods..."

The game is split into two approaches – the long, linear pathways to hackchop through and the obligatory timed mini-levels scattered here and there. The latter are along the lines of 'kill everything' or 'smash everything' before the time runs out, the former involve slogging through wave after wave of enemies, a drudgery occasionally interspersed with a switch to press.

During the mini-games, the weak directional controls caused some quite mother-shockingly bad language, sprinkled liberally among sentences such as "BUT I *WAS* [auntie-scaring] PRESSING THE [cattle-worrying] BUTTON!" But more damagingly, the rest of the game seems only to serve to demonstrate quite how incredibly good *Sands of Time* really is. So similar are *Gladiator*'s attempts at combat that the comparison is impossible to avoid, and it just cannot begin to compete.

The gaming joy is supposed to be found within the intense and bloody carnage. It certainly comes thick and fast, wave after wave, with Battle Royale-esque bloodshed and *Mortal Kombat*-inspired combos and FINISH HIM!!! moves. And despite being far too repetitive, it's not so bad at that.

For an afternoon's hack-'n'-slash, there's the glimmer of fun here. It's an average beat-em-up game – simple as that. But in a world with *Prince of Persia* in it, there's just no reason to bother.

JOHN WALKER

LAP PET

You can't help but notice how pretty the game is. Unless of course you haven't just spent $4500+ on a new PC. You HAVEN'T?! Ah. Running on the office's new pet laptop – a machine of such power to make mortal men weep – *Gladiator* looks absolutely gorgeous. However, working on any other computer, it either didn't, or just looked all right. Bearing in mind this is a PS2 game, there's no excuse for that.

PCGA PROFILE

Gladiator is:
- **Bloody**
- **Intense**
- **Annoying**

Gladiator is not:
- **Innovative**
- **Evolving**
- ***Prince of Persia***

■ Publisher **Acclaim** ■ Developer **In house** ■ Minimum System **PIII 1GHz, 1.3Gb HD, 256Mb RAM, GeForce 3 FX or higher** ■ Recommended **P4 2GHz, 512Mb RAM, dual-analogue gamepad** ■ Multi-Player **Nada... zip** ■ Web Address **www.acclaim.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Prince of Persia: SoT
Everything *Gladiator* is trying to be, but with all the innovation you could eat.

Severance: Blade of Darkness
Same fantasy melee mayhem, but much more fun to play.

PC GAMES addict
Rather shallow sword swinging Roman romp, lacking the majesty of the gods.

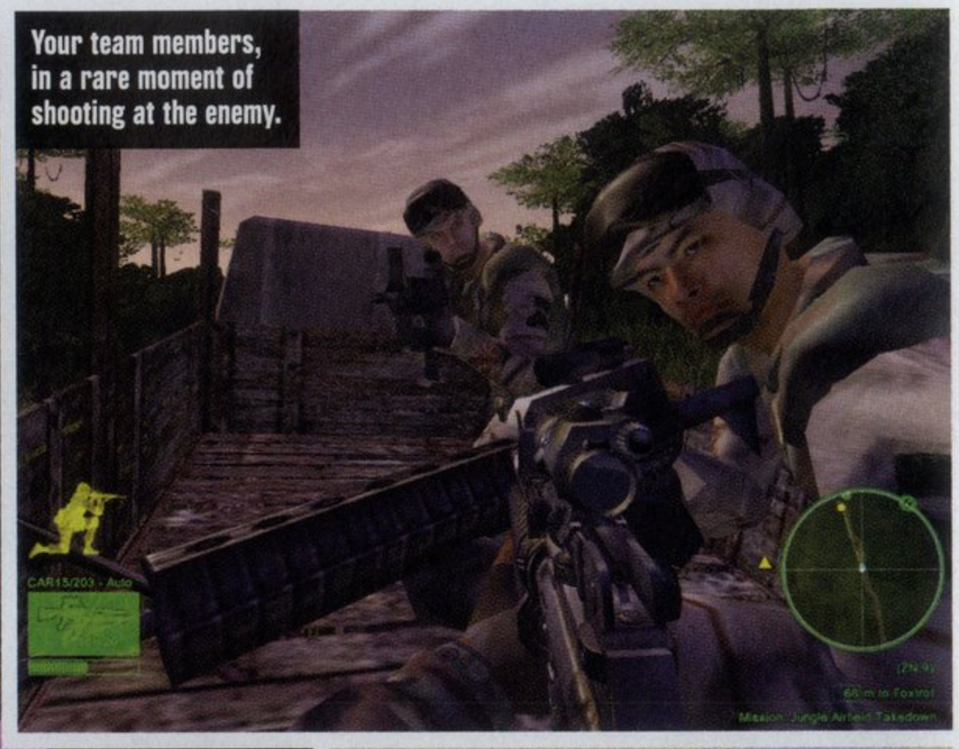
55%

GENRE: FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

BLACK HAWK DOWN TEAM SABRE

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

'On rails' shooting sections lead you into the levels.



Your team members, in a rare moment of shooting at the enemy.

SQUADDIES

The annoying thing about the squad AI is how sloppy it is. The team are usually more than capable of holding their own, but then show themselves up with some truly inspired idiocy. No-one with this level of training runs across the line of fire. One way around this is to issue the squad command to hold position then run on a bit. You may be on your own, but the chances of friendly fire are greatly reduced.

LET'S assume you're reading this because you want to know how to make the most of that *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* disc sitting on your desk. It's been almost a year now, and you've been itching to get your paws on more tactical, twitchy-fingered, claustrophobia-inducing missions. Well, unless you've got a good internet connection, you may as well keep waiting.

Team Sabre is not really an expansion of the *Black Hawk Down* experience, just an extension. Two campaigns and 11 missions are offered, in which a Columbian drug cartel and group of Iranian terrorists get to feel the righteous ire of American and British forces. The locales, it's true, are a change from the streets of *Black Hawk Down*, with open deserts and forests replacing the narrow alleys and urban missions. This change, however, takes away most of what made the original game so playable: those tight firefights. The Iranian levels give a closer approximation of the previous, city-based fighting than the looser Columbian Cartel assaults, but all it ultimately amounts to is more missions for a game that's beginning to show its age. In fact, the single-player campaign feels so by-the-numbers Mystic Meg

The Yanks get all the best toys.

"Exhibits an odd mixture of tension and pratfall."

could probably predict them. There's nothing spectacular here. No big final battle like *Black Hawk Down*'s Sweet Irene, and so it all peters out to nothing.

And it *still* exhibits the odd mixture of tension and pratfall the original did. You'll slowly clear the decks of an occupied oil rig, for example, crouch-running in the narrow corridors with your team close in behind, only to spot an enemy running against a wall with half his body poking through to the other side. The enemy AI, never *BHD*'s strong point, is even more exposed on *Team Sabre*'s open terrain. Without the solid walls and sniping areas of an urban environment, they tend to offer themselves up for target practice, running into streams of lead like they're refreshing showers of rain. Such moments are especially evident during vehicle insertions. For example, the raid on the Doroud oil-drilling platform, which begins with a slow dinghy ride towards the platform, with a long circle for you to pick off enemies with the .50 cal. You'd think that taking down the sentries like this would cause some commotion, but the terrorists barely blink an eye. Further on in the missions you get to see previously unseen terrorists bursting out of their perfectly adequate cover like gazelles with a death wish.

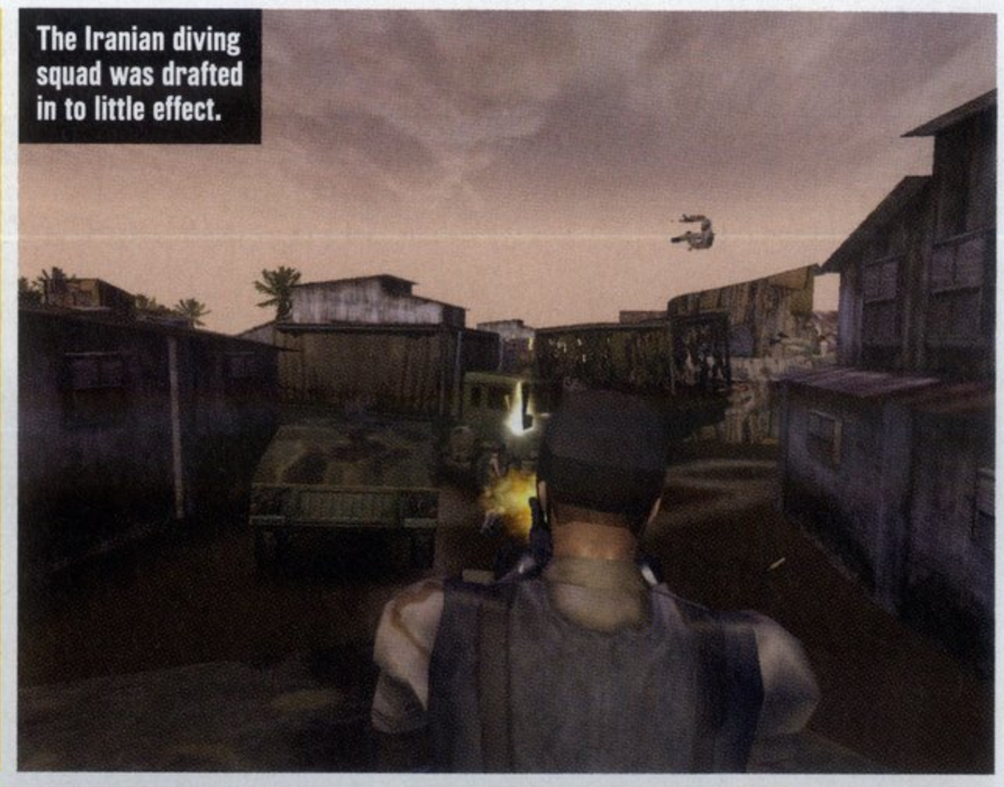
Even the team AI is far more dangerous to you than the enemy's. Your team-mates should be the world's elite, able to take out targets with the minimum of fuss, but that illusion is shattered the moment you find yourself on the boat heading into Iran, where you discover your ineffectual squad are quite happy to sit there and allow both themselves and you to be slaughtered by enemy fire. Any brief nod made to teamwork lacks depth and purpose in this expansion. What's the point of having a team if you're left as the only effective operative?

OPERATION WOLF

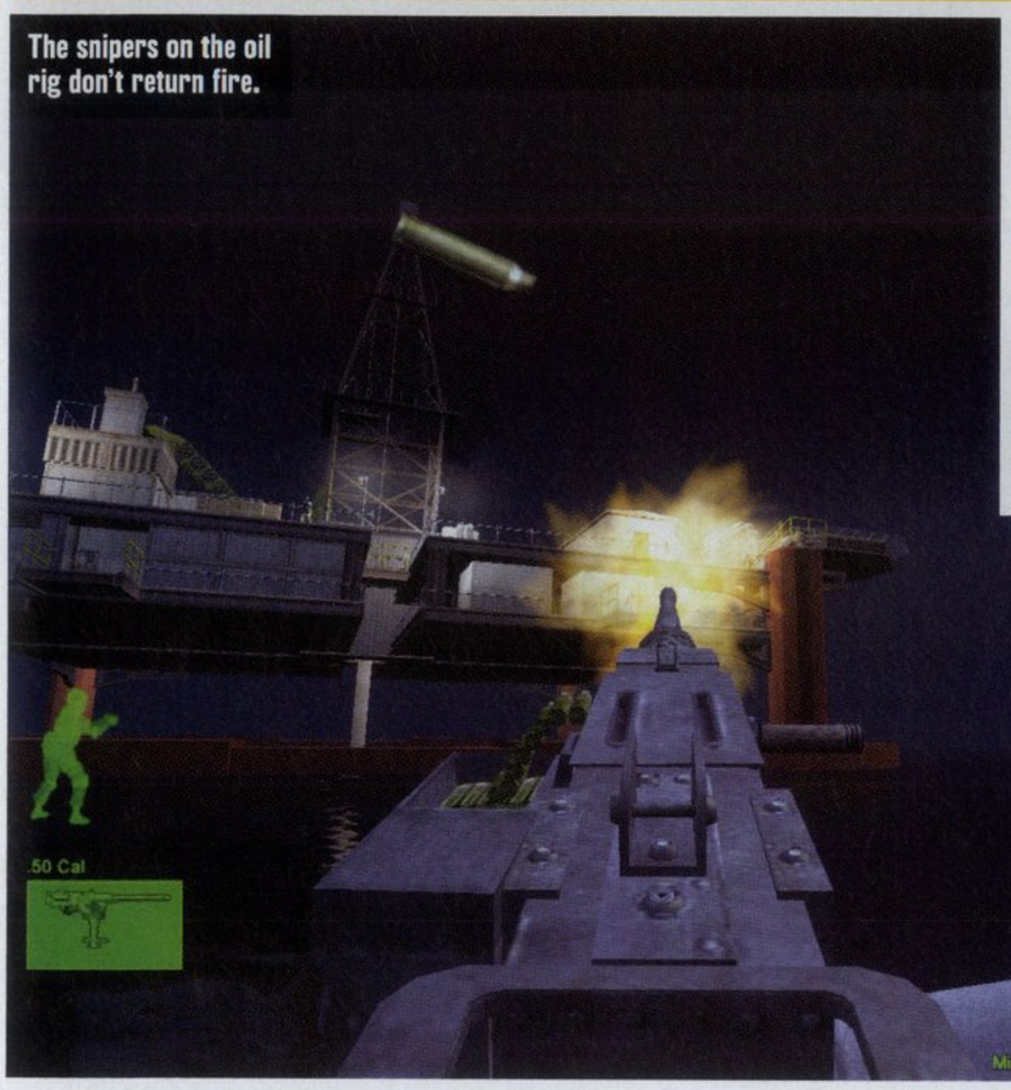
Can 'on-rails' shooters make an impact in today's gaming world? Well, no. But sadly, a large bulk of the extra missions start off with vehicle insertions, and leave you playing that coin-op classic.

Can they really expect you to find this exciting? A featureless ocean is not the way to go.

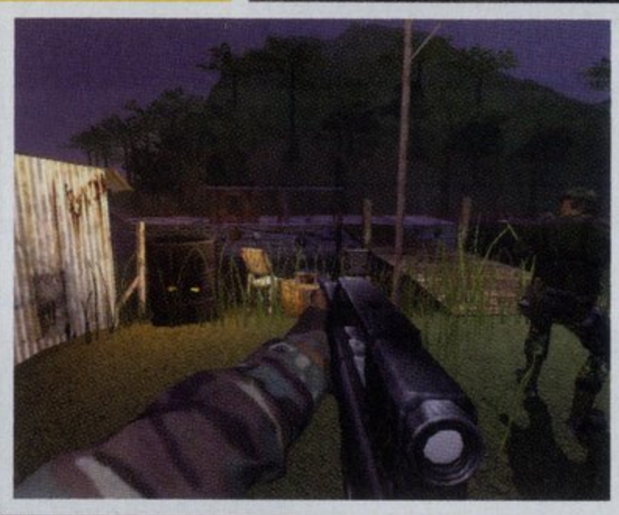
Here's where the enemy decide it's better to die, and run right at you despite the thick vegetation.



The Iranian diving squad was drafted in to little effect.



The snipers on the oil rig don't return fire.



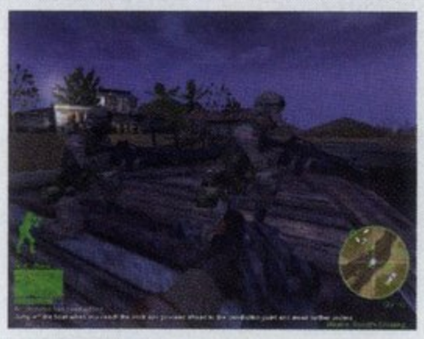
Vehicles explode when shot. Good.

SYSTEM MISER

How *Team Sabre* will play on *your* PC

■ Supported resolutions: **640x480 to 1280x1024** ■ Scaleable options: **Terrain detail, object detail, texture detail, shadows, more.**

VERDICT: It's starting to look a bit old in the sabre-tooth texture-wise, yet this can still chug when things get busy on screen. The large maps and the large number of enemies mean that, even now, an above average rig is required for this to look its best, and we'd suggest you take RAM into consideration as the large scale needs plenty of memory to run well.



Amazingly, in spite of all this *Team Sabre* is still an addictive experience. In the more open environments, your line of sight is huge. Sighting an enemy patrol and picking them off with short bursts of your SMG, watching as the bodies arch, then slump, is as fun as always. The Columbia-based missions in particular give plenty of opportunity for the stealthier player to snipe away entire patrols before moving in. Exploding a truck or petrol-filled barrel to take out those foolish enough to use it for cover is, if you'll forgive the pun, a blast. (*No, we won't* – Ed.) Betraying the realistic approach the game proffers, there are moments of pure arcade: even if the bad guys can't wait to be killed and your team can't shoot straight, getting stuck in a vast firefight is a exhilarating experience.

Nevertheless, it's the multi-player that's the saving grace of this add-on. There's enough here to extend your playtime on the Novaworld servers for at least four months. The intense conflicts, slow pace, huge maps and player numbers were always a draw with *Black Hawk Down*, and *Team Sabre* adds a lot to the mix. 30 new maps are available, and, devoid of the shoddy enemy and team-mate AI of the single-player mode, they're a far better way to experience the game, and far more of a reason to buy this expansion, than the single-player content. Here you can make the most of the additional weapons, including a powerful PSG1 sniper rifle. Stalking through the jungle terrain, heavily camouflaged, it's possible to move unseen right into enemy territory and slaughter the oblivious fools. With the *Team Sabre* servers already buzzing with multi-player activity, you can just about justify buying this.

Hidden & Dangerous 2 and *Call of Duty* are hard acts to follow. *BHD: Team Sabre* is a fight best fought on the online battlefields. If you're looking for a single-player experience to immerse yourself in, it offers little in the way of expansion, alteration or even the most basic improvements.

CRAIG PEARSON

Light

PCGA PROFILE

Team Sabre is:
- **Small**
- **Similar**
- **Intense**

Team Sabre is not:
- **Long**
- **An improvement**
- **Sabre-toothed**

■ Publisher **Novalogic** ■ Developer **In-house** ■ Minimum System **PIII 733, 64Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card**
■ Recommended **P4 1.4GHz, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **LAN, internet, 32 players.**
■ Web Address **www.novalogic.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

PC GAMES addict
Strictly for fans of multi-player mayhem. The single-player missions add little.

68%

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Hidden & Dangerous 2
Intense squad combat the way it's meant to be played.

Call of Duty
More arcade-skewed than realistic, but a far more intense game to take on.

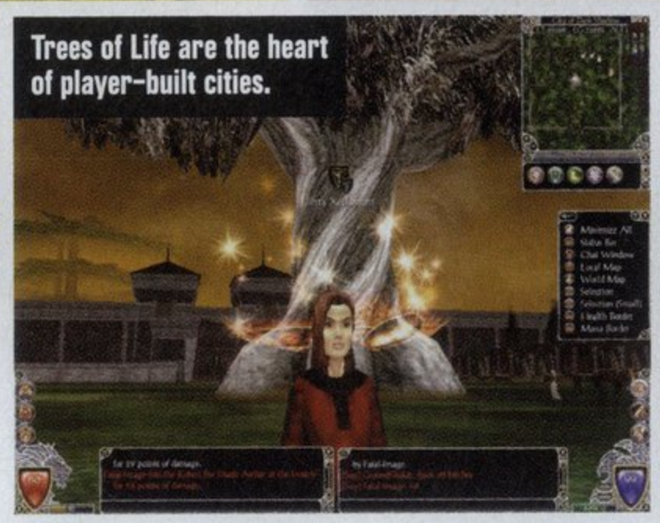
GENRE: MMORPG

SHADOWBANE

Clearly, not a very effective one – it's still looking decidedly dark in there.

You know your hero credibility needs work when you start getting flashed by Shelob.

Oh, it's fun to slay at the YMCA...



Trees of Life are the heart of player-built cities.

EXCLUSIVE ENTRY

Not everything in *Shadowbane* is available right at the start. You can't choose to play as a Minotaur, Arocoix or Centaur character until you've clocked up a couple of month's worth of game time – one being unlocked with each new payment. At the same time, what can be given can also be taken away. It doesn't take long before you get kicked out of the training guilds, and you really don't want to be all alone in the big, bad world. Trust me.

Murky

PLEASE find submitted for your bearded approval: one of the olde-worldiest chunks of old-worlde role-playing action that you'll find on PC. In the time that it's taken to get from design stage to a box on the shelves of your local game shop – and don't be fooled by the 'Gold' in the full title, because this is *Shadowbane*'s first appearance on our shores – you could have done anything from learning a foreign language to building a full-scale model of the Sydney Harbour Bridge with your own toenail clippings.

Shadowbane is not like other MMORPGs. While you begin with much the usual role-playing fare, running around fantasy-land on a mission to kill, crush and destroy anything that gets in your way, the real focus is on Player vs Player combat. The twist is that you don't fight under the generic flag of some fictional empire, but your own – creating, building and developing whole cities to power your war effort, recruiting other players into your burgeoning empire and ultimately taking the battle to rival empires. Where *Shadowbane* succeeds and, say, *Dark Age of Camelot* failed, is that it doesn't put anything like as much effort into trying to offer one set of content for player vs monster action and another for PvP, but tailors the experience firmly with a view to high-level players making their own end-game fun.

Teleportation tunnels can make you feel actually, literally, sick.

The first hint of this comes right at the start. MMORPGs invariably offer turgid openings, with slow level-curves

"*Shadowbane* is not like other MMORPGS..."

designed to keep you as far from maxing out your character as possible. *Shadowbane* still forces you to earn your stripes on the level treadmill, but greatly ratchets up the speed. My initial mage character, armed with nothing more than starting equipment, was soon obliterating orange and red-coded monsters (translation: 'bring your friends, you'll need 'em') without breaking a sweat, and shooting up levels at a real clip.

In terms of character design, *Shadowbane* is closest to *Camelot*, with a splash of *Fallout* thrown in for good measure. You begin as one of four generic classes: Fighter, Rogue, Mage or Healer, before picking a more specialised profession when you reach the tenth level. Certain character choices can affect the available options, such as only female characters having the option to become Furies, and Elves not being cut out for the barbarian lifestyle. These are spelled out in advance. This isn't the only customisation that you can take advantage of, however. Each of your skills is developed by acquiring Practice Points in combat and tracking down a suitable trainer, forcing you to decide exactly which skills to concentrate on, and by the addition of Traits and Disciplines. Traits offer a number of bonuses to various aspects of your character, such as making them extra lucky or especially immune to poisons, while Disciplines (of which you can have up to three) give you advanced powers ranging from turning into a Werewolf to calling down lightning storms. Mix and match these elements and you can easily carve out a unique character for yourself.

Unfortunately, not all of *Shadowbane*'s departures from the

THREE STEPS TO THE PERFECT YOU

Take one wrong step in *Shadowbane*, and you'll wind up a griefer's lunchtime snack. Be prepared for the oncoming battle.

After creating your character, you have to pick a starting city. By default, you only get the safe, computer-controlled ones – it's best to go along with that.

Begin hunting small enemies. You can navigate either by clicking on the main window, or in the minimap. Always go for the toughest monsters you can find.

The starting computer destinations are much of a muchness. After Level Ten, it's time to head out into the wide, wild world, where anyone can get you.

Now what kind of deity would live in a temple like this?

SYSTEM MISER

How *Shadowbane* will play on *your* PC

- Supported resolutions: **640x480 up to card maximum**
- Scaleable options: **Texture size, image quality, shadow rendering, blood, special effects... if you see it, you can toggle it.**

VERDICT: **The advantage of *Shadowbane's* ancient graphics is that you don't lose that much by switching effects off. The disadvantage is that it clobbers you with heavy system requirements anyway. Lag is the real killer, on broadband or not, and it's not uncommon to be told that you've died while seemingly still locked in mortal combat. Which does spoil the surprise.**

MMORPG norm are quite so successful. Navigation is especially painful, demanding that you click on destinations to move around rather than directly using the cursor keys, with the camera controlled by dragging the mouse to the screen borders. This is apocalyptically frustrating, especially inside buildings, and not helped by non-existent pathfinding that will happily see your characters trapped in corners or banging their noses against trees. The interface has its redeeming features, notably a command bar that saves you having to remember exactly what you need to type to join a group or wave your arms in the air, but is ultimately clumsy, annoying and very badly designed.

Even more serious is the pathetic tutorial, which consists of little more than info screens popping up seemingly every time you move the mouse. They tell you how to perform individual tasks, but only when you happen to click on their window and not as part of a structured lesson in how to actually play the blessed game in the first place. *Shadowbane*'s training area is very quiet, with far too many characters droning on incessantly about back-story rather than offering practical advice. Combine this with serious lag issues, even when nothing of note is going on, the obvious lack of graphical splendour, and the outright draconian death penalties should you die outside of the training grounds, and you can easily start wondering if you're actually wanted in this world.

This is especially unfortunate, as the meat of the game does offer plenty to sink your teeth into. Unlike other games that offer group-based PvP, the fact that you're working for your own city rather than just playing rounds of Capture The Flag with wizards and warriors offers genuine longevity, and of course, commitment. There's no point whatsoever in playing *Shadowbane* if you plan to wander around on your own. Any other game on the market handles that side of things better.

The real hook is that nothing else even offers – never mind comes close to – the freedom and political spin offered by the end-game. *Shadowbane*'s general age and unfriendliness make it a bad introduction to the genre by anybody's standards, but should you be looking for something that will keep your sword sharp even when every dungeon's denizen lies dribbling at your feet, it could well be a MMORPG worth migrating to.

RICHARD COBBETT

PCGA PROFILE

Shadowbane is:
- **Social**
- **Ugly**
- **Different**

Shadowbane is not:
- **Light work**
- **More of the same**
- **For hermits**

■ Publisher **Ubi Soft** ■ Developer **Wolfpack Studios** ■ Minimum System **PII 700, 128Mb RAM, 32Mb graphics**
■ Recommended **P1.5GHz, 256Mb RAM** ■ Multi-Player **No single-player & Internet only**
■ Web Address **www.shadowbane.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Final Fantasy XI
Bright, coloured graphics, plenty to do, and very easy to get into, even for the novice.

Dark Age of Camelot
Reminiscent of *Shadowbane* in many ways, but far more for casual players to enjoy.

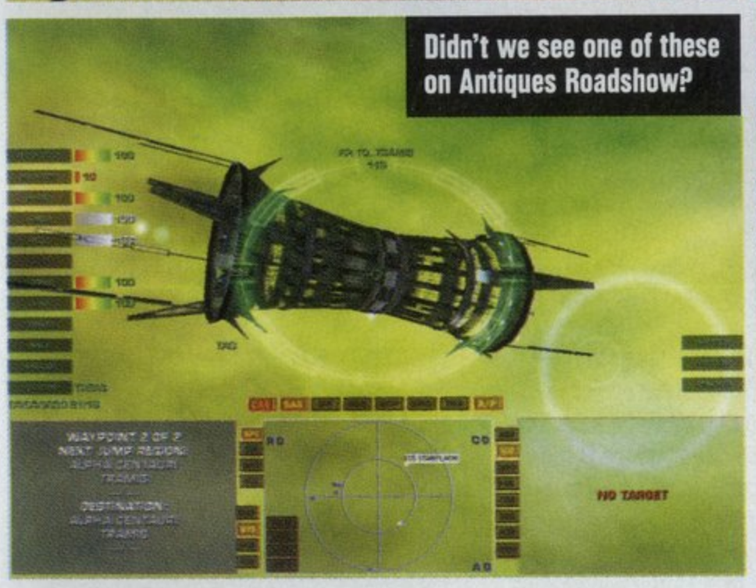
PC GAMES addict
Suffers greatly from its prolonged gestation, but plenty of potential here.

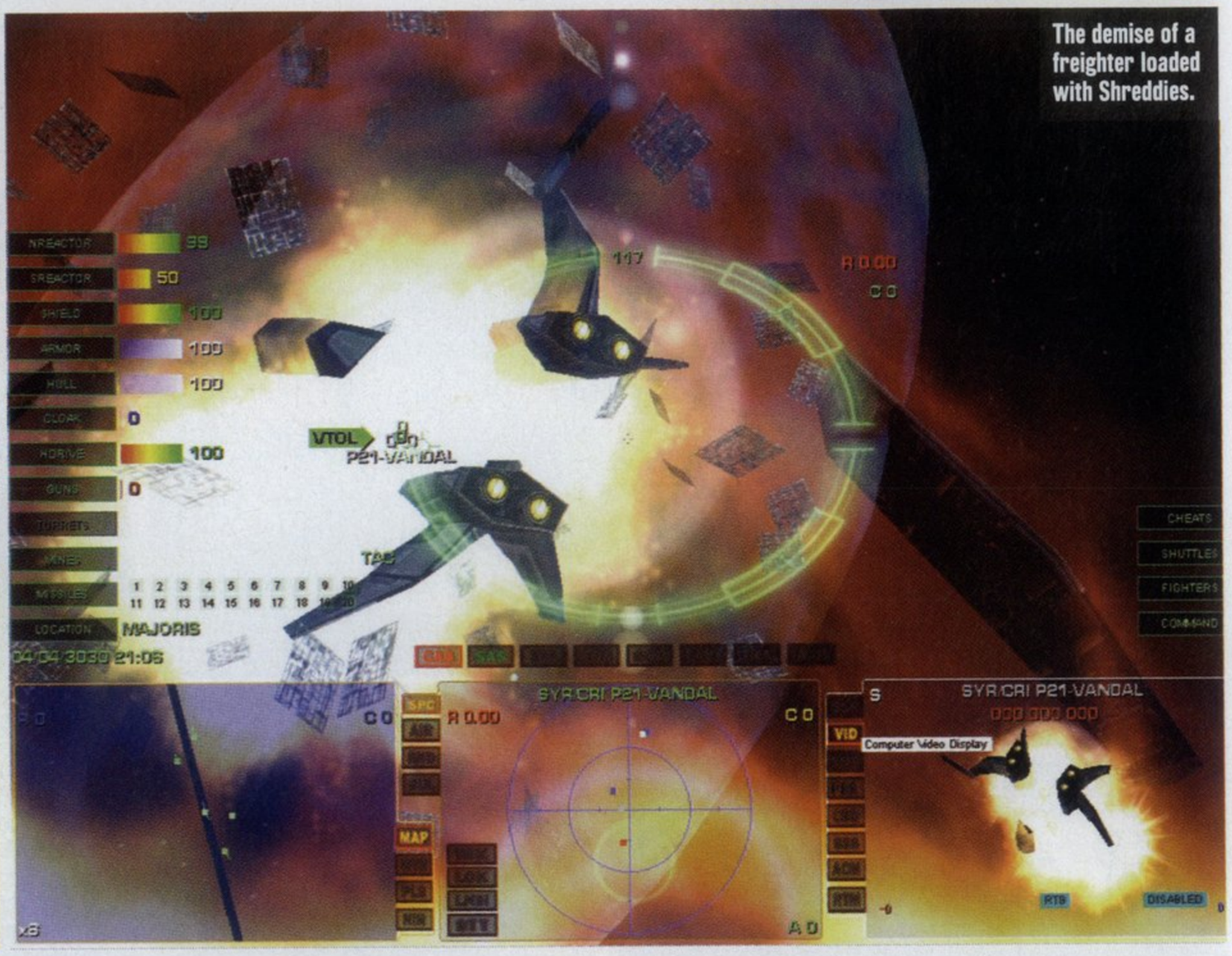
70%

GENRE: SPACE SIMULATION

UNIVERSAL COMBAT

"A cloaked *Battlecruiser* is still a *Battlecruiser*."
Old Gammulan saying.





THE MERCHANT OF VENUS

Commerce is a fairly primitive and tedious affair in *UC* but can reap rich rewards over time. All castes are able to buy and sell commodities but play as a trader and you enjoy the considerable advantage of being able to do business with everyone rather than just allies and neutrals. The disadvantage of defining yourself as a deep space bastion of free trade at the start, is your first craft is likely to be more hippopotamus than greyhound.

THE wonderful world of gaming would be a much less interesting place without its lone-wolf developers, that's for sure. The creations of men like Chris Sawyer, Austin Meyer, Ilan Papini and Derek Smart often have a personality, a quirkiness, or depth to them that's absent from the collectively forged output of more sizeable studios. Unfortunately the fruits of the solo approach often display characteristic shortcomings too, the more obvious ones being graphical fustiness, uneven quality and a painfully slow rate of change over the course of a series.

All of these criticisms can be levelled at the *Battlecruiser* series of which *Universal Combat* is – to all intents and purposes – the fifth instalment. Despite promises of a new, friendlier outing, and a more action-oriented feel it has to be said that this is a game that on first – and second – inspection appears remarkably similar to the last galactic conquest offering from Derek Smart, *Battlecruiser Millennium*. There *are* a few changes of course – most obviously in respect to the visuals – but the core play experience is little altered.

"Remarkably similar to the last Smart offering."

The continuity will doubtless please *Battlecruiser* devotees. (For a little while longer there's an uncompromisingly complex, combat-oriented space sim on the shelves that doesn't padlock you to the captain's chair, pen you into a cramped corner of the galaxy, and pressgang you into a narrative you have no interest in.) There's the risk, though, it could also lead to disappointment for any gamer, seduced by pre-publicity, box art and blurb, and the new natty moniker, into expecting a kind of frenetic interplanetary *BF1942* from what is actually a fairly pedestrian, fiddly, and intimidating game.

Squirrels with very cold paws have less trouble getting into cross-threaded jars of peanut butter than the average, uninitiated Homo Sapien has in getting into a *Battlecruiser* game. Amazingly, *UC* actually manages to be *less* penetrable than its predecessors, lacking as it does even the brief html tutorials provided with *Battlecruiser Millennium*. Equivalents will apparently be uploaded to 3000ad.com at some point in the future, and – yes – headway can be made with the help of the dense, diagram-deficient manual alone, but that doesn't alter the fact that this is a game that needs a sequence of integrated tutorial scenarios as much as an otter locked in a salmon cannery over Christmas needs a tin-opener.

Battle through the bewilderment, come to terms with the revised but still idiosyncratic interface and the arcane acronyms scattered liberally about every screen, and you will eventually arrive at a place from where *UC*'s unique strengths can be enjoyed without confusion or irritation. Strengths like the fantastically detailed system-modelling of starships, and the scale and unpredictability of the vast dynamic universe in which all action

SMART CARD OFFERS ACCESS ALL AREAS

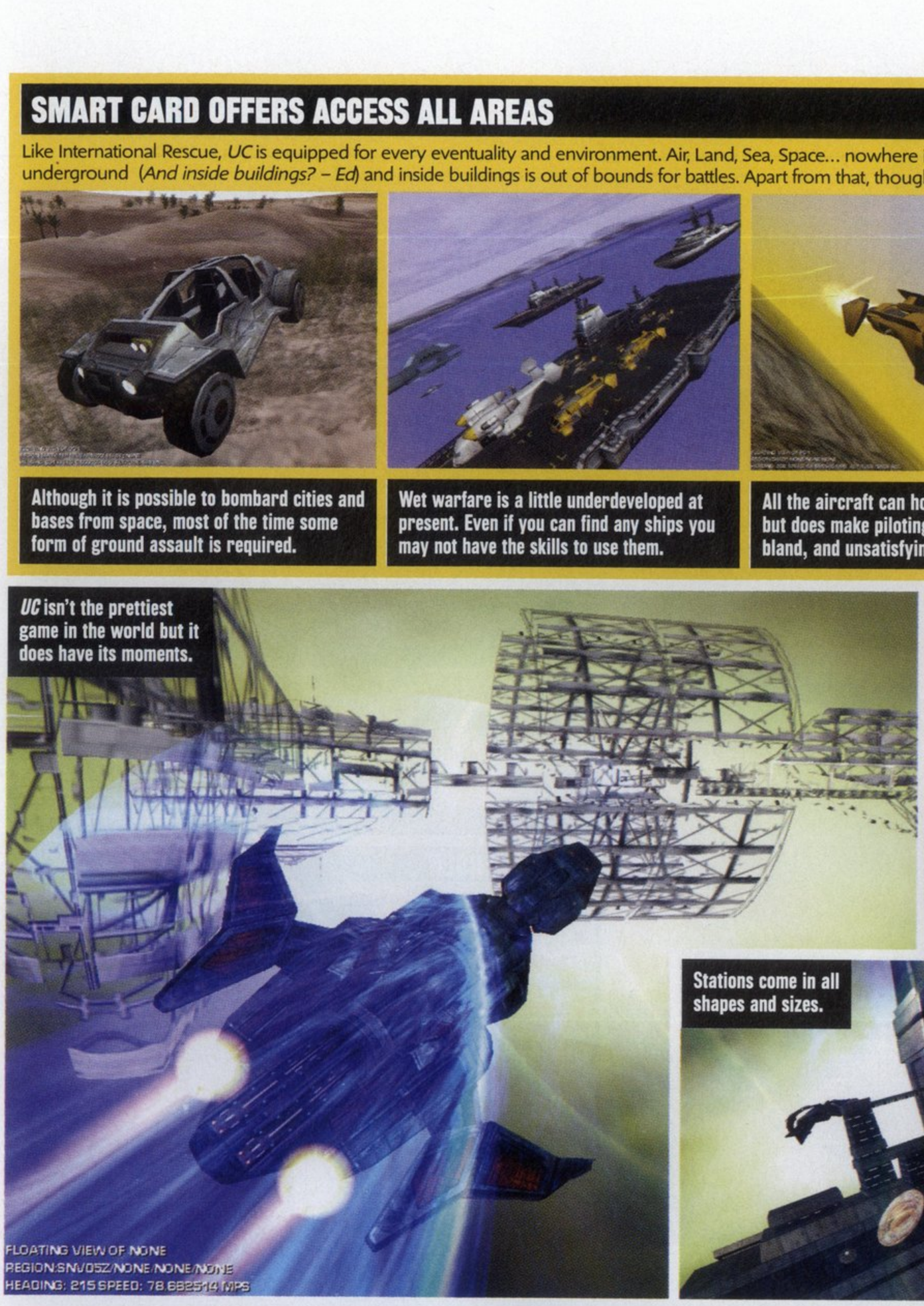
Like International Rescue, *UC* is equipped for every eventuality and environment. Air, Land, Sea, Space... nowhere is out of bounds (*What about underground? – Ed*) Nowhere *except* underground (*And inside buildings? – Ed*) and inside buildings is out of bounds for battles. Apart from that, though, nowhere is out of bounds.

Although it is possible to bombard cities and bases from space, most of the time some form of ground assault is required.

Wet warfare is a little underdeveloped at present. Even if you can find any ships you may not have the skills to use them.

All the aircraft can hover which is handy but does make piloting them a slightly bland, and unsatisfying experience

Space, the setting for the first ever computer game and several others since, is the environment in which *UC* really shines.



UC isn't the prettiest game in the world but it does have its moments.

Time to put the red bulb in.

Stations come in all shapes and sizes.

Smartian

unfolds. Although vessel interiors aren't represented graphically either in 3D (wholly understandable considering their variety and size) or schematic form (regrettable), they are modelled, meaning the movements of individual crewmembers and intruders and the spread of radiation leaks and disease can be tracked and controlled – albeit awkwardly – via text-based displays.

You might never get to press up against Ensign H'ltagh's ample triple bosom in a packed virtual turbolift but anytime you want you can check her whereabouts, her assignment and her vital statistics via the perscan computer. All NPCs within the game have a set of evolving RPG-style stats that influence their performance, and – even with the possibility to clone dead personnel – encourage a culture of care.

If there's a scent of ripe Roddenberry emanating from what's been described thus far it should be made clear that *Universal Combat* is first and foremost a ship-on-ship combat game. There's Stuart Little in the way of diplomacy, trade (see 'The Merchant of Venus') or alien encounters on offer. The aliens you do encounter tend to be taciturn, faceless fellows who never bother to hail you before a fight for an exchange of insults, or a spot of "Send-us-the-one-you-call-Ensign-H'ltagh-and-we-will-spare-your-puny-craft"-style bargaining.

"First and foremost a ship-on-ship combat game."

Dispensing with the jawing does mean more time to relish the ructions. *UC*'s frequent fiery fleet fandangos might not be as spectacular as *Homeworld* or *Haegemonia* engagements (damage depiction and laser effects are not the best) but they do feature some fine enemy AI and the kind of quasi-naval tactical tension that's been in very short supply in recent space sims. There's no question that this is a game that's at its best amongst the stars. Sadly, when activity shifts to the surfaces, seas and skies of the 250 planets things take a handbrake turn for the worst.

For the past ten minutes I've been desperately searching for the word or phrase that best describes the planetside action in *UC* and frankly 'pony and trap' fits the bill as well as anything. On paper it sounds superb – the opportunity to stretch your pins after a long hyperspace haul by flying/beaming down to a nearby planet and joining your marines in a first-person firefight. Factor in 30-odd flavours of driveable transport including Warthog-style buggies, tanks, APCs, fighters and dropships and it's pretty hard to imagine why the average continued over

WAX LYRICAL

Recently I had the surprisingly pleasurable experience of having my ears syringed. After a day or two with *UC* I was seriously considering returning to the doctors and enquiring whether they could reverse the process. With a few exceptions, the sound effects are truly abysmal. The intolerable background bridge chatter, the bizarre grunts from wounded marines, and the limp laser reports have to be heard to be believed.

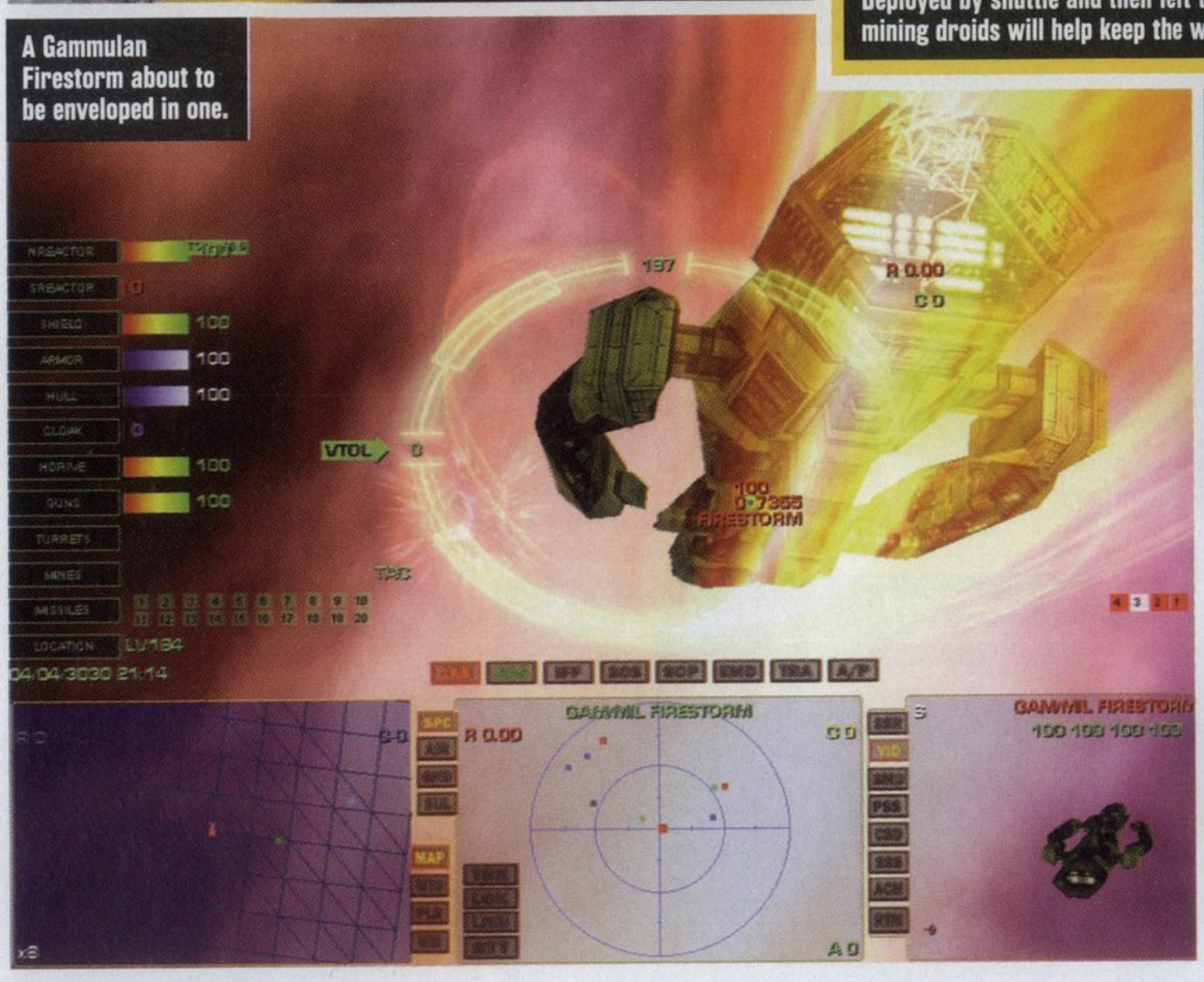
Dash-dash-dash-dot-dot... oh, sod that. I'm off to the lifeboats.

MANIC MINER

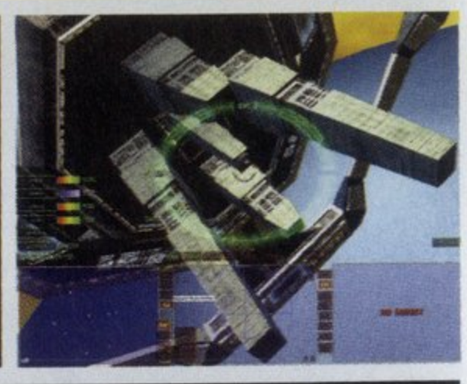
Without cash to upgrade and replenish your vessel you aren't going to get too far in *UC*. Though there are numerous ways to earn a crust we'd recommend a spot of mining.

Deployed by shuttle and then left to bore, automated mining droids will help keep the wolf from the door.

Sowing mines around jump anomalies can earn you cash. And cargo pods jettisoned by victims can too.



A Gammulan Firestorm about to be enveloped in one.



SYSTEM MISER

How *Universal Combat* will play on *your* PC

■ Supported resolutions: **800x600 to 1600x1200** ■ Scaleable options: **Many including texture quality, mipmaps, models, lighting explosions, terrain mesh, backgrounds, grass, trees, and wildlife.**

VERDICT: If you have a card with vertex and pixel shader support then – congratulations – *Universal Combat* is going to look a lot shadier. Presently there's no collision detection active for the numerous trees and animals in the game. This is apparently a framerate preserving measure but can make combat in forested terrain a little surreal.

red-blooded gamer wouldn't be as happy as a mutt in a charnel-house. So what goes wrong?

Well for starters, most of the skirmishes tend to occur in and around flat, boring starbases that are the same from one end of the galaxy to the next. Unsexy firearms, coarse collision detection and a curious camera act as further disincentives for foot activity. Seriously sapping the appeal of the rides are Pigling Bland handling characteristics that mean wheeled/tracked conveyances don't bounce or skid, or bleed speed when scaling slopes, and aircraft motor around the firmament as if they are on rails. Couple this with generic engine sounds unaffected by throttle position, and no cockpit bitmaps or virtual interiors whatsoever (all craft in the game share essentially the same HUD interface) and you end up with a facet of the game that quite simply doesn't cut the Coleman's.

Luckily there's no real need to ever tread terra firma in person (assaults, mining ops and such can all be choreographed from space) assuming, of course, you haven't chosen one of the planet-bound careers in a 'roam' game. The roam mode is the most unconventional of the four entry-points into *Universal Combat* (the others being a reasonably diverting story-driven campaign, a selection of rather uninspired single missions, and a multi-player mode offering deathmatch and co-op play).

"A pedestrian, fiddly, and intimidating game."

Within it, you are unequivocally the master of your own fate, free to go anywhere you want and do anything you please in the perpetually warring dynamic universe, to then earn the cash that buys ship upgrades, and the experience points that yield promotions and fleet responsibilities. It's disorientating but liberating too; the antithesis of the police-states that pass as playgrounds in many peer products.

Like a washed-up games reviewer with a stodgy, alliteration-afflicted writing style who changes his name in a pathetic attempt to ditch his old dowdy image, *Battlecruiser* will have to do a lot more than rebrand and tinker at the edges if it's serious about broadening its fanbase. The *Battlecruiser* games have always been as niche as they come and, sadly, this one is no different.

TIM STONE

PCGA PROFILE

Universal Combat is:
- **Jack of all trades**
- **Master of one**
- ***Battlecruiser Generations Plus***

Universal Combat is not:
- **Accessible**
- **Short on ambition**
- **Strong on narrative**

■ Publisher **Dreamcatcher** ■ Developer **3000AD.com** ■ Minimum System **PIII 1GHz, 128Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card**
■ Recommended **P4 1.8GHz, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card, joystick** ■ Multi-Player **LAN, Internet, 64 players**
■ Web Address **www.3000ad.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

PC GAMES addict

The combat may be universal but the appeal is decidedly on the niche side.

65%

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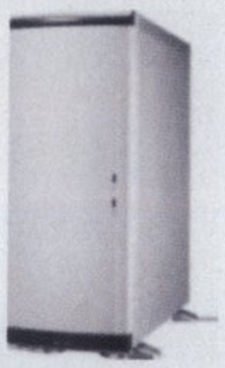

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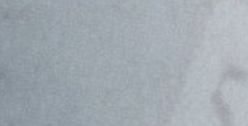

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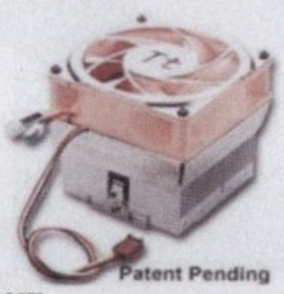

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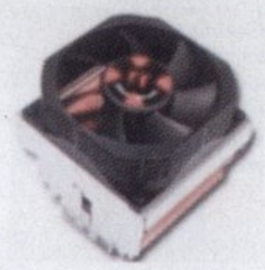

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GENRE: SPACE SIMULATION

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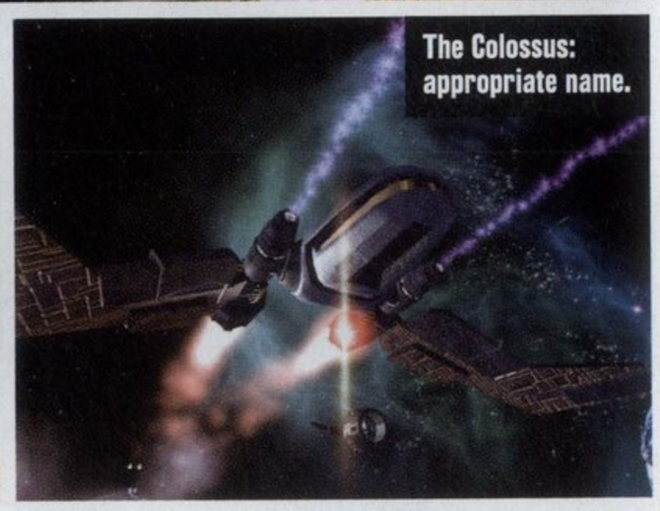
Half-way to XXXX, but this is by no means pint-sized.

X2's massive, living, breathing galaxy is an explorer's dream.



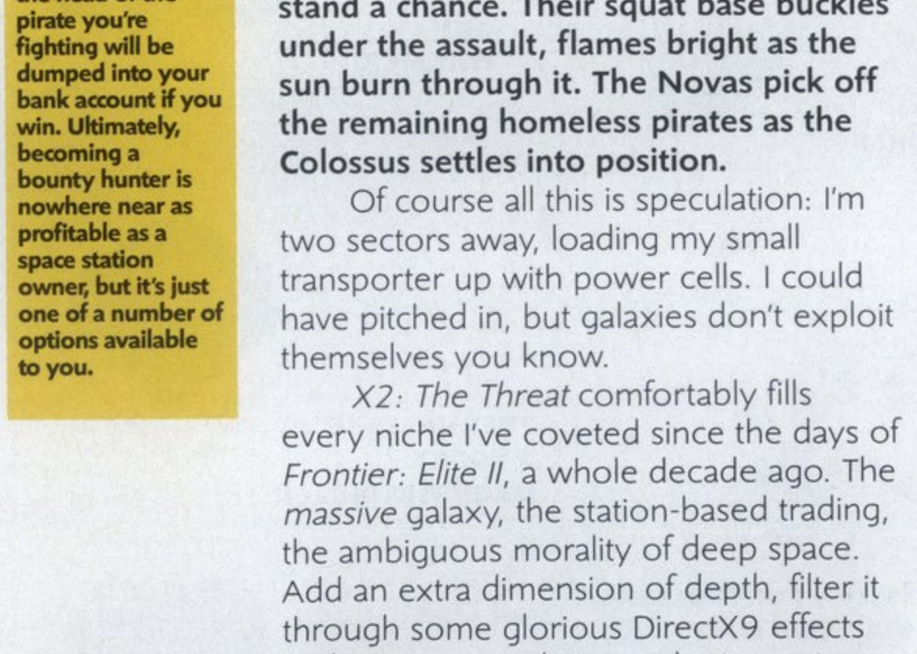
FIGHT CLUB

If you must take part in scraps, make sure you've got yourself a police licence. It means that any bounty placed on the head of the pirate you're fighting will be dumped into your bank account if you win. Ultimately, becoming a bounty hunter is nowhere near as profitable as a space station owner, but it's just one of a number of options available to you.

MY fleet is poised. A single command gives the signal to attack and they move as one. At their heart is the Argon Colossus, slow moving and as solid as a sledgehammer. Flitting about it like birds of prey, Argon Novas burn blue trails. The pirates don't stand a chance. Their squat base buckles under the assault, flames bright as the sun burn through it. The Novas pick off the remaining homeless pirates as the Colossus settles into position.

Of course all this is speculation: I'm two sectors away, loading my small transporter up with power cells. I could have pitched in, but galaxies don't exploit themselves you know.

X2: The Threat comfortably fills every niche I've coveted since the days of *Frontier: Elite II*, a whole decade ago. The *massive* galaxy, the station-based trading, the ambiguous morality of deep space. Add an extra dimension of depth, filter it through some glorious DirectX9 effects and you've got a living, pulsating universe to play in. But before I come over all unnecessary and start excitedly describing trade routes, I'd better begin at the beginning.



You need a hefty rig for this effect.

You start as a lone thug, rescued from the ignominy of prison by a mysterious benefactor. TerraCorp, it seems, have a vested interest in turning you into a model citizen. You're given a weak ship, a pep talk and a person in another sector to contact and, after an excruciatingly bad cut-scene, launched into the universe. It's a daunting prospect,

"There's still a chance of redemption for me."

made daunter by your limited knowledge of the ways of the cosmos. But the possibilities put you in the mood for adventure and expansion, which is what *X2*'s all about.

And it's about then, just after the tentative burst that takes you away from the station, that the game grinds to a halt. Just briefly, mind. *X2*'s controls – menu after menu – are as deep and involving as the universe they lead you through. Intuitive they are not. You need to invest as much time and practice in learning the keymaps, subsystems and navigational controls as you do in learning the layout of the universe. It'll take a good five hour's concentrated play just to break the surface of understanding. Even if you endure the extensive tutorials, you simply won't get the best out of *X2* until the controls become second nature. Perseverance is the only way forward and you need to put a lot of dollars into this game before it starts paying out.

Once you're past that initial bout of bewilderment, *X2* opens up like a Supernova. A dynamic economy beats at the heart of the game: in every sector ships pass through shifting freight from one station to another, feeding demand. The laws of supply and demand and the rollercoaster of commodity prices are the stuff of *X2* riches. Manipulate that and you can make a profit. Start off small-time: shipping passengers from place to place, freighting small goods (energy cells are always in demand). Build up enough cash to buy another ship, then plough the trade routes. The moment you find a profitable run, bleed it dry and move on to the next. Every sector teems with interesting details that bring the game to life. Stations trade with each other; rogue asteroids can be mined; craft potter around making their own small contribution to the economy. If a sector starts to wear thin then head for a jumpgate. These massive relics of a forgotten race catapult you into another sector – ripe for fresh profiteering. A slow, steady expansion of your power is necessary to open up the game, and sets you up for the major decision: what next?

Missiles are invaluable in the more taxing combat sessions.

Alert: Missile closing

The Boron vessels are stunning.

Stations all over the universe are happy to trade goods.

Jumpgates enable you to switch sectors.

IN THE MONEY

Here's a good example of the game's economic intrigues working in your favour. The second mission requires you to take a transporter and collect a group of scientists from Atreus Clouds. Carry them back through Argon Prime and dock at the Argon Equipment Dock. Trade with the station. Sneakily relieve the ship of its 25MW shields, replacing them with 1MW. Carry on to Home of Light and dock at the station. Before you get in contact with Ms Kho, sell the shields. Complete the mission and you get to keep the money from selling those shields to boot.

Spacious

What do you want to become in this universe? Do you stick to the relative safety of the inner worlds and build an empire, eventually taking over your own sector? Do you become a bounty hunter, and prowl the less salubrious areas of the universe picking off felons and trading their bones for cash? Do you set up a space station and start producing the products that feed the economy?

Or something else? I went for pirate, me, and not the charming Johnny Depp type. There isn't a race that I haven't harassed just for the hell of it. And God help anyone who has something I want: I'll take it just because I can. Even better, there's still a chance of redemption for me. I can pay my dues back if I so choose. If someone's having trouble and I wipe out the harassing element, then my stock will rise a little. Carry on in that vein, clearing pirates or the alien Khaak, and the stations in that sector will once again let me dock. A bit of mutual trading and I'll be back in the good books. And unless the plot dictates it (and it can be completely ignored), then it's *my* decision to do so. Because your choices never force you down one path, a bounty hunter has as much chance of owning and operating a space station as anyone else. It's all down to cold hard cash and the determination to go all the way.

Equally impressive is the way the whole universe carries on regardless. Scenes like the one described in the opening paragraph are the norm. You can expand your own fleet into uncharted territory and you don't even have to be there. Just plot out the course, and let them go. The larger ships can carry a bellyful of smaller craft (up to 130), and

"The whole universe carries on regardless."

they can lead other craft into battle. Your own ambition dictates the game. Amass a fleet and you can take over a whole sector. I get a perverse joy from owning a bigger fleet than the Queen, but I'm not stuck in the space office. I get about in a small, sleek Boron Octopus, carrying on my adventuring in deep space.

X2 loses a little of its sheen whenever you have to communicate with an alien species. The embarrassing cut-scenes are root-canal dentistry in game form. Every alien labours with Yoda-like speech mannerisms and muppet-in-a-blender design.

But it's the plot that lets down *X2*. Forcing you to suffer a poorly directed, badly-written storyline is not what any game should aspire to, never mind one that revels in freedom. The battle against the alien Khaak (great name) introduces unbalanced elements to the game. Especially as the mission-specific details spoil the sense of freedom that is *X2*'s greatest strength. The interference of the alien threat, while devastatingly brutal, is, ultimately, a non-event. Given that you can carry on with the game after the story is over, the question is why should anyone worry about the Khaak in the first place. It just feels like a distraction chucked in as an after-thought.

Combat is also a problem. It's a struggle to keep up with a target even when you're flying the fastest ships. The controls aren't responsive enough and your ship's field of view isn't continued over

POWER STRUGGLE

A cheeky way of getting rid of a space station is to use the biggest transporter you have to nudge an asteroid towards it. If you're lucky enough to survive the collision with the hunk of rock, you should be able to wipe away the station without incurring any loss in status. Mwuhahahahaha.

A full-on battle. Keep track of the target with the HUD and the radar.

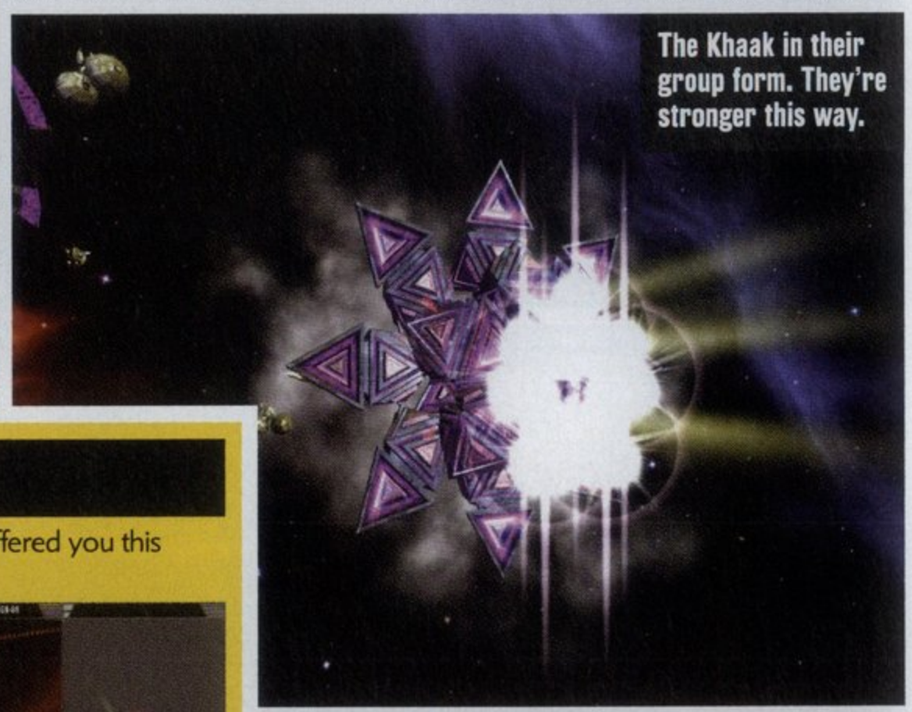
SYSTEM MISER

How *X2: The Threat* will play on *your* PC

■ Supported resolutions: **640x480 to 2048x1536** ■

Scaleable options: **You can switch off antialiasing, bumpmapping and shadows for a smoother experience.**

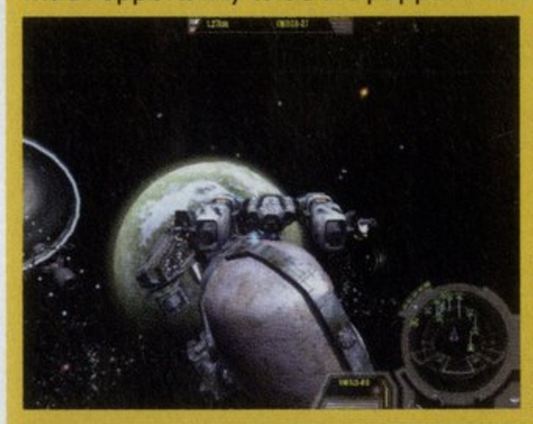
VERDICT: ***X2*'s a hell of a system hog, and the more of everything you have the better, including RAM and processing power for the background number-crunching. A hefty 3D card will make those nebulae glimmer. Even on our Alienware beast large numbers of enemies caused a bit of slowdown, but Egosoft are committed to patch this baby all the way to smoothness.**



The Khaak in their group form. They're stronger this way.

FLEETFOOT

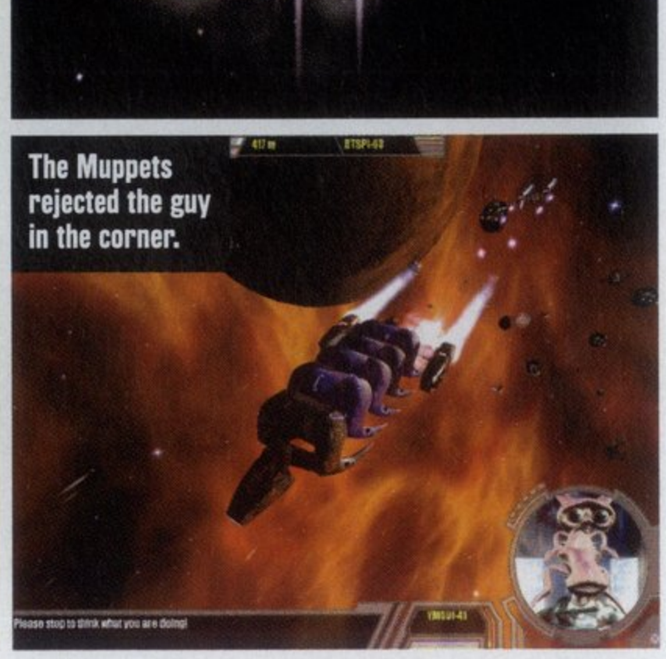
The level of control you have over the other ships in your fleet is astounding. Never before has a non-RTS offered you this much opportunity to be the puppet master. Make 'em dance.



You can order ships to automatically protect you in battle. They take up strategic positions and cover enemy approaches. As with everything in life, the more escorts you have, the better.

The monitors let you remotely take over any aspect of another ship, from steering to the laser cannons. If you have more than one monitor you can set the display up with multi-monitor.

If you decide to go for a spacewalk you can remotely pilot the ship or set it to travel to a waypoint. This saves you time as the jets on the suit are as strong as a kitten with a limp.



The Muppets rejected the guy in the corner.

wide enough. You end up chasing shadows. Ignore the plot, however, and spend your first few days in the Argon systems, and you can pretty much get on with making some cash without the worry of pirate hostilities. Then build up a small fleet and order them to protect your hide when you want to go flyabout.

X2 is system-hoggingly beautiful. Gorgeous in the same way that *Doom III* promises to be, with dynamic lighting casting the game in dazzling tones. The dominant colour of each system glows off the shiny surface of your ship: gold in Paramid Prime, cold blue in Argon Prime, dirty red in Red Light. And it's all so lovingly detailed: the raised edges on asteroid impact craters pool shadows as they tumble over and over. Unlike so many other space-bound games, nebulae exist as in-game objects. Pools of neon gas tumble, sometimes lit from within by raging storms, sometimes cloaking the corner of the sector so you have to fly through them to see what's in there.

"The angular Khaak ships slot together like Lego."

Ship and station design would make Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen squeal with delight. Witness the style of a Boron Dolphin, a sectioned carapace that slinks like a sine wave; the angular Khaak ships that slot together like Lego. There's a wonderfully alien quality to the game's aesthetic as the organic mixes with the mechanical to stunning effect.

Overwhelmingly huge, *X2: The Threat* is not a game that can be recommended to everyone. If dogfighting's your thing, then *Freelancer* is the better bet. *X2* rewards a patient, dogged building-up of resources, a hamster-like hoarding of credits driven by the goal of owning that Buster, Vulture or Dolphin ship. It's about making something from very little. If, like me, the thought of taking on the universe on your own terms is a droolsome prospect then I suggest you hop on board. Join the already thriving community at www.egosoft.com, dim the lights, clamp on the headphones and play it like you've made a lifestyle choice.

CRAIG PEARSON

PCGA PROFILE

X2 is:
- **Deep**
- **Involving**
- **Complex**

X2 is not:
- **Easy**
- **For lightweights**
- **Newtonian**

■ Publisher **Deep Silver** ■ Developer **Egosoft** ■ Minimum System **PIII 800, 128Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card** ■ Recommended **PIII 1.8GHz, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **None**
■ Web Address **www.egosoft.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

EVE Online
MMO *Elite*-style game set in a huge universe. Trade or fight your way to glory.

Freelancer
More combat orientated, less open space sim. Does great dogfights.

PC GAMES addict
It's a universe in a box, hermetically sealed for you to make your mark on.

87%

WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

You won't have any trouble finding these guns!

SOCOM II and Rainbow Six 3 put the world's most high-tech weaponry in your hands. OPS2 has the world's first review!

Australia's ONLY magazine with playable demos.

PlayStation 2
OFFICIAL MAGAZINE-AUSTRALIA

GENRE: MMORPG

HORIZONS
EMPIRE OF ISTARIA

But these narrow horizons are such a drag(on). Sorry.

Character customisation is not particularly inspired.

Recall
Stop Action
Create Item
Sit/Stand
CAMERA
Lock Position
Message of the day : Welcome to The World of Istaria. You have entered Ice !
Screenshot horizons_1071791951.png has been saved.
Screenshot horizons_1071791970.png has been saved.
Screenshot horizons_1071792179.png has been saved.
You are not allowed to teleport to that destination.

Pah. Innovations have been selling those things for years now.

Spells and combat are awkward and obvious.

BOOB JOB

One mesmerising part of *Horizons* is in character creation, where female characters have a slider for 'endowment'. It's quite a peculiar experience, inflating and deflating a lady dwarf's breasts. Not titillating as such, just reasonably unique. Well it amused me, in any event.

THE MMORPG is one of PC gaming's greatest achievements. Of this there can be no doubt. The concept is the kind of thing that sci-fi writers in the early '80s stayed up late at night dreaming about, feverishly predicting its weird ways in their addled visions of the imminent information society. But even they could not have imagined what was to come. To have hundreds of people in the same virtual world is a weird and triumphant thing, but this unique and beautiful rose has begun to wither.

Brutal fact: *Horizons* is *pointless*. It's excruciating. In a world where we have the ludicrously expanded *Everquest*, *Dark Age of Camelot* and *Asheron's Call 2*, it is entirely redundant. By the time this world also has *World of Warcraft*, *Warhammer Online* and *Everquest II* filling its game-store shelves, *Horizons* is going to look laughable indeed.

Horizons claims to be the next generation of MMORPG: if so then I must remark on what a stunted, inbred, and ugly generation that is. Games aren't supposed to be rednecks, degenerating with every rut of the diminishing gene pool; they're supposed to be bright, mercurial lights of ever-increasing dynamism and delicate invention. *Horizons* is the slack-jawed throwback.

False

The game starts like all other trad fantasy RPGs: you choose a race that defines some of your in-game characteristics. These races include humans, gnomes, demon-like creatures (the fiends), cat-people (the Saris), lizardmen (the Sslik) and even dragons.

"What horror must have taken place to spawn *that*?"

(Being a dragon is one of the game's big selling points, but we'll come to that later.) You can even be a half-giant. So, a large man then. Hang on – a *half-giant*? What horror must have taken place to spawn *that*? Man!

Once you've got that image out of your mind, you send your badly animated avatar to train up in a particular skill set. The total lack of imagination includes: mages, clerics, adventurers, various crafting classes, including the scholar, who can create the 'Runes' required for spell casting. Naturally, there's the ability to multi-class too, but it's disastrous, massively inhibiting the powers your previous class provided you with.

From the outset the graphics are ugly and lazy. Very soon after starting play, you begin to realise that *Horizons* is a nasty lump of a game that makes no effort whatsoever to suspend your disbelief. There are pointy signs saying things like 'Resources' with a helpful arrow. Helpful? Well yes, but they're also ruinous for any kind of atmosphere that the game might have hoped to have. There's even a sign to 'Monsters' – as if you'd get muddled by the three possible directions you can walk in.

Phew. Lucky they put all that in, or I might have started to lose myself in this fantasy world. I might actually have been distracted, for a moment, from the reality of what I was doing: playing a poor man's

ONE CLICK BEYOND

There's a world of things to explore in *Horizons*. An ugly world of dull things, but it's a world nonetheless.

Wow! Other people provide the best reason to play *Horizons*. They've got stuff to say.

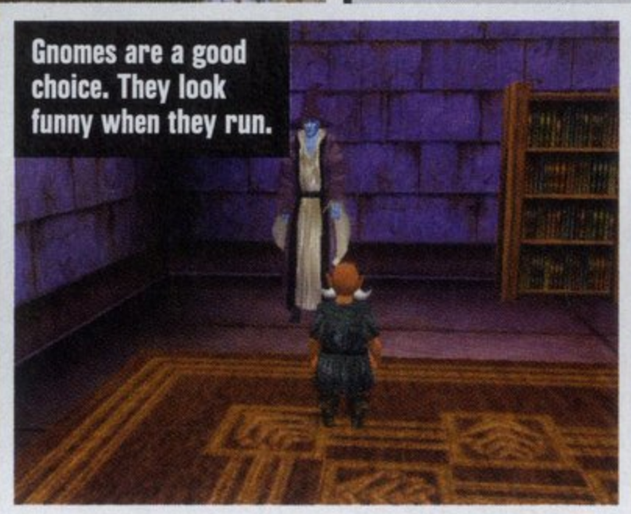
Click a couple of times and watch a fight that looks like it was animated by monkeys!

Craft many things, via the ancient art of standing still, clicking. It's great.

Sell the stuff you built on the online bazaar system. You can even use the website! Woo!

Gather
Trade
Greet
Camera
Lock Position
Message of the day: Welcome to The World of Istaria. You have entered Wind !
Your Sprint I has faded.
You have gained 100 experience points in the Mage school. This is a quest reward!
You have received 40 copper.
Delicious, delicious! Phoenix eats a Broiled Minnow.
You use Sprint.

The full landmass of *Horizons* is the biggest yet in an MMO.



Gnomes are a good choice. They look funny when they run.

Mmm. Another inspiring vista.

SYSTEM MISER

How *Horizons* will play on *your* PC

- Supported resolutions: **640x480 to 1600x1200**
- Scaleable options: **Geometry, shadows, texture detail**

VERDICT: **The engine isn't particularly adventurous, so you'll not see particularly impressive graphics at any point. A moderate machine will be able to handle the game with gusto. There are some issues with lag in highly-populated areas, however, so that the framerate drops. Here it's a connection issue, rather than your old graphics card.**

MMORPG. And that would never do, would it? Imagine if I'd somehow been able to think of the game as an escapist pleasure, rather than a workman-like click-a-thon. Wouldn't that have been awful? It must be pointed out at all times that this is an MMO. *Horizons: more like a dull job than a game.*

Horizons does almost everything that other MMORPGs do, only a bit worse. There are currently no PvP possibilities and the monster-slaying combat is gaspingly tedious: you click spells, click weapons, and leave the fighting to be resolved. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm getting a bit tired of turn-based combat of this nature. I want more sophistication, or something in real-time. Using the excuse of latency issues is no longer viable. We've all seen *PlanetSide*.

Fair enough: I suppose the dragon character class is worth a moment's distraction: it looks ace, and if you persist, like a lunatic, then one day you'll be a big flying fellow who can carry other players on your back. Shame about the poor animation and lack of imaginative quests though, eh?

The other 'big thing' on *Horizons'* boast-list is the capacity to create houses, or even, when whole guilds get together, towns and castles. Needless to say, this feature is flawed too – providing no real benefits, other than having an in-game house, and the enormous expense of maintaining it. The core idea here is one of community building, and there are even interfaces to allow players to arrange gatherings, to help out in such things as big quests and big building sessions. Frankly, it's hard to want to be part of a community that likes this game.

And there are yet more things that annoy. Laggy servers, no collision detection, no in-game dungeons, quests so unimaginative they might have been penned up an accountant: the list goes on and on.

Ultimately, there is no reason to pay month after month to play this game. *Horizons: Empire of Istaria* is the weakest joke in the increasingly dire comedy of massively multi-player gaming. And why indeed does anyone even think that we want to play more traditional fantasy MMORPGs? WHY? When will someone use their imagination and do something different? I'd rather play Russian roulette with six bullets than see another game that has lizardmen, wizards, dwarves and *bloody* cat-people walking the streets. I mean, *cat people*. How creatively bankrupt is that? Rubbish.

Actually, I am looking forward to *World of Warcraft*, but that's another story.

JIM ROSSIGNOL

PCGA PROFILE

Horizons is:
- **Large**
- **Bland**
- **Troubled**

Horizons is not:
- **Finished**
- **Innovative**
- **Imaginative**

- Publisher **Atari** ■ Developer **Artifact** ■ Minimum System **PIII 600, 128Mb RAM, 3D card, Internet access**
- Recommended **1.5GHz CPU, 512Mb RAM, GeForce 3 or better, broadband** ■ Multi-Player **Online only**
- Web Address **www.istaria.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Star Wars Galaxies
Far better crafting than *Horizons*, but not without its problems. Now has landspeeders.

Dark Age of Camelot
Doing the PvP thing in a way that *Horizons* players can only dream of. A fine fantasy.

PC GAMES addict
Not even dragons can save this uninspired piece of online role-playing weakness.

52%

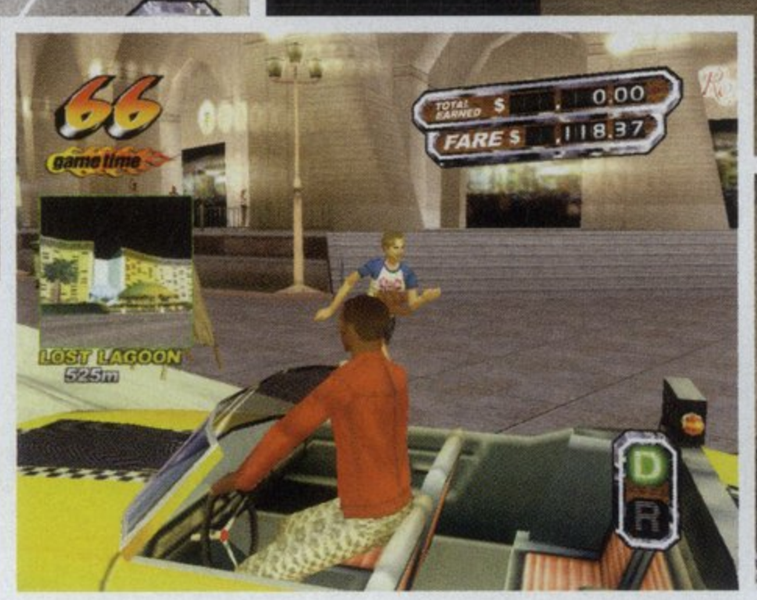
GENRE: DRIVING

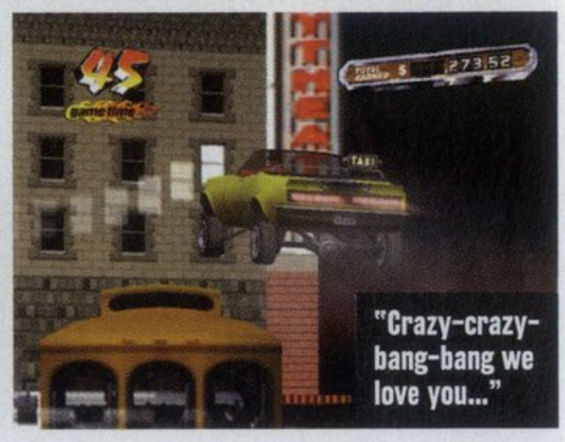
CRAZY TAXI 3 HIGH ROLLER

You wait hours for a crazy taxi, then three turn up at once...

Why let just one blond muscle-man into the backseat?

Normal? There's nothing normal about this. This is *crazy*.





"Crazy-crazy-bang-bang we love you..."

VOICE BOX

The churning, punky soundtrack is all very well if you like young people's music, but I recommend turning it off, the better to hear the cacophony of voices. Somewhat surprisingly, you'll hear potential passengers hailing you, near-miss pedestrians cursing you and passengers either berating or congratulating you. The quality of the voice-acting is pretty good, and if the actual number of phrases is limited, it's a nice touch.

THERE'S something very sinister about taxis, I find; especially the ones with auto-locking doors and nuke-proof glass between you and your cackling, eye-glinting driver. Once you're inside, *you're no longer in control*. Oh, you can *ask* to be taken somewhere, sure. But when you pass the same burned-out car for the third time and that prickly, sweaty feeling crawls across your scalp and down your back, you start to feel, in a very real sense, you're being taken for a ride.

Mind you, such detours are inevitably unpleasant and threatening if you're in a dark, deserted industrial area, many miles from civilisation and a working telephone. Taking another trip around West Coast's eye-searingly colourful streets, with the sun shining and happy folk hollering all around, is another matter, and an adventure we'll happily sit back and enjoy.

Not that you'll be sitting back much, of course, because the crazy taxis and the crazy drivers are controlled, of course, by you: the crazy gamer. Not feeling too crazy? Off you go and dig up that copy of *Grand Prix 3*, my friend, because *Crazy Taxi 3* is not only crazy, but also wacky and, on occasion, even zany. Not just colourful-tie crazy, but full-on pants-on-head, woodlouse-eating, spittle-flecked crazy. Forget about a nod towards realism; *CT3* doesn't even acknowledge realism's existence in the same galaxy.

The shtick, in case you missed the arcade original, the subsequent Dreamcast version, the Dreamcast sequel and this third in the series which hit the Xbox in 2002, is that you propel a taxi around a city picking up customers and taking them where they want to go. Some are solo, but there are also groups of up to four who'll all want to go different places within a set time – and the rewards for these multiple trips are greater. Okay: not an especially crazy proposition. However, the manner in which you get from A to B is what matters, and time is very much of the essence. Each passenger has a time-limit before which they'll expect to be at their destination; in addition, there's an overall timer governing your stay behind the wheel. Under 'Normal Rules', successful trips add seconds; you can also opt for three, five or 10-minute runs in an effort to accrue as much lucre as possible from your to-ing and fro-ing.

"Full on pants-on-head, spittle-flecked crazy."

The single city of the original has been joined by two further cities; Small Apple (pseudo-New York, previously seen in *CT2*) and Glitter Oasis, a night-time, neon-fringed vision of Vegas. All are expansive and varied, with hills, underpasses, overpasses, canyons,

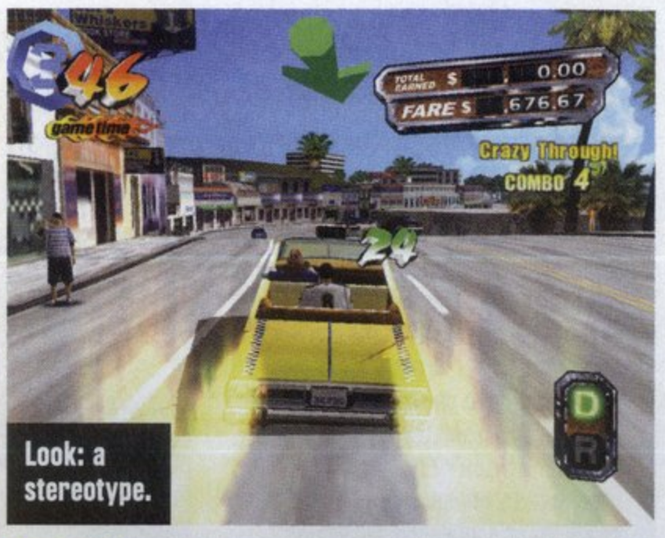
CITY LIMITS

Three crazy cities are on offer in *Crazy Taxi 3*, each sporting slightly different crazy environs around which to ply your crazy trade. Each demands the same – drive quickly and accurately – but are different enough to provide a new experience.

WEST COAST: Blue skies, blue sea, yellow taxi. In any other world, a colour-clash disaster, but it works well in this mix of low buildings, hills and beach life.

GLITTER OASIS: The desert comes alive at night, which is a pretty scary thought, so it's best to stay in this Vegas-lite metropolis.

SMALL APPLE: Ahah – see what they did there? Pseudo-New York is all about tall buildings and narrow streets, making it tricky to navigate. Nice park, though.



Look: a stereotype.

You can't miss your destination with arrows and luminous targets to guide you.

Passengers pay extra for dangerous stunts. Presumably for a 'soiling charge'.

Eek! Crazy crate!

Chequered

bridges, beaches, rivers, malls, drains, plazas, parks, car-parks, alley-ways, fields and arcades. But the challenge never varies: pick up passengers, drive and earn cash. Get 'em there quick and you earn more. Perform jumps, near-misses or other manoeuvres and your delighted passenger will throw even more cash your way. These manoeuvres constitute special moves which will facilitate your speedy travel around the city – Crazy Jump in particular, used wisely, avoids the traffic and scenery snarl-ups that are otherwise inevitable for the earthbound helmsman.

The fact that I can sum up the game so briefly is both its great failing and its great appeal. Those gamers who understand 'arcade' as 'lightweight' will search in vain for entertainment here, but its simple structure, which made the original cabinet game so compelling and is intact here, will certainly please those who consider themselves purists.

Although, it must be said there are many caveats to my recommendation of *Crazy Taxi 3*. First and foremost, those purists may have played this game before, if not literally in the form of the

"If a game offers little, it must be near-perfect."

near-identical *CT3* on Xbox, then on the very similar earlier Dreamcast games or the original's PC conversion. The visuals have not had the loving spruce-up that graced *Knights of the Old Republic*, and as such are blocky and flat by today's standards. Played on a keyboard, as was never intended, *CT3* feels awkward and occasionally unresponsive. While we're all multi-platform gamers these days, and while we'd like to think that our PCs can accommodate any kind of game, *CT3* never really feels *right*. It's like a crab in an aquarium: you know it would be more at home in a proper arcade. The sea. Whatever. Another niggle, and odd for such a racer, is that you need to shift gear to reverse rather than holding the brake key. Minor, yes, but distracting in such a time-dependent game.

These are crucial, though, because if a game offers little, that which it offers must be near-perfect. It's easy to overlook the odd control bug or broken mission in the likes of *GTA III* because there's simply so much to do; other distractions to lure the eye and the fingers. So is it an admission of defeat or a generous gesture for *CT3* continued over

I SAY, DRIVER...

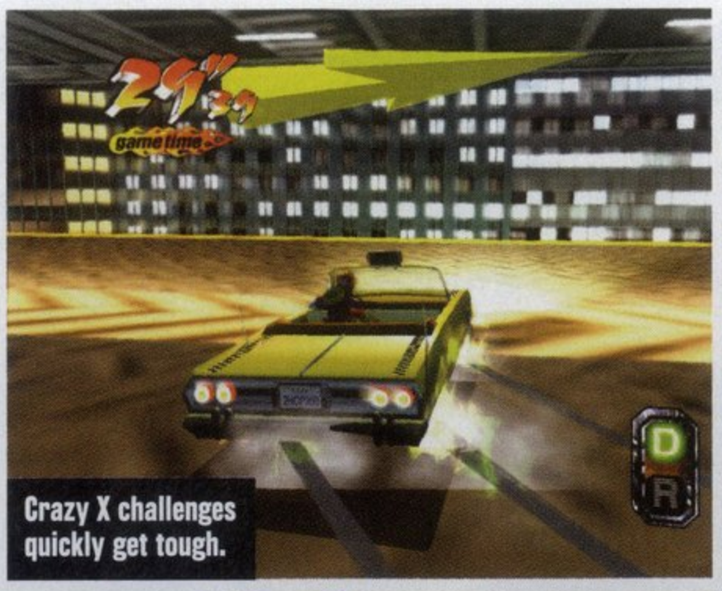
Each of the three cities is prefaced by a selection of four drivers, each with a slightly different design of yellow, open-top taxi, each with the same performance and ability. Not that a little variety is unwelcome in a largely repetitive game, but you'd hope that selecting the old, grey-haired chap over the camp, muscle-clad rocker might have some impact on what happens next. Unfortunately, it doesn't.

SYSTEM MISER

How *Crazy Taxi 3* will play on *your* PC

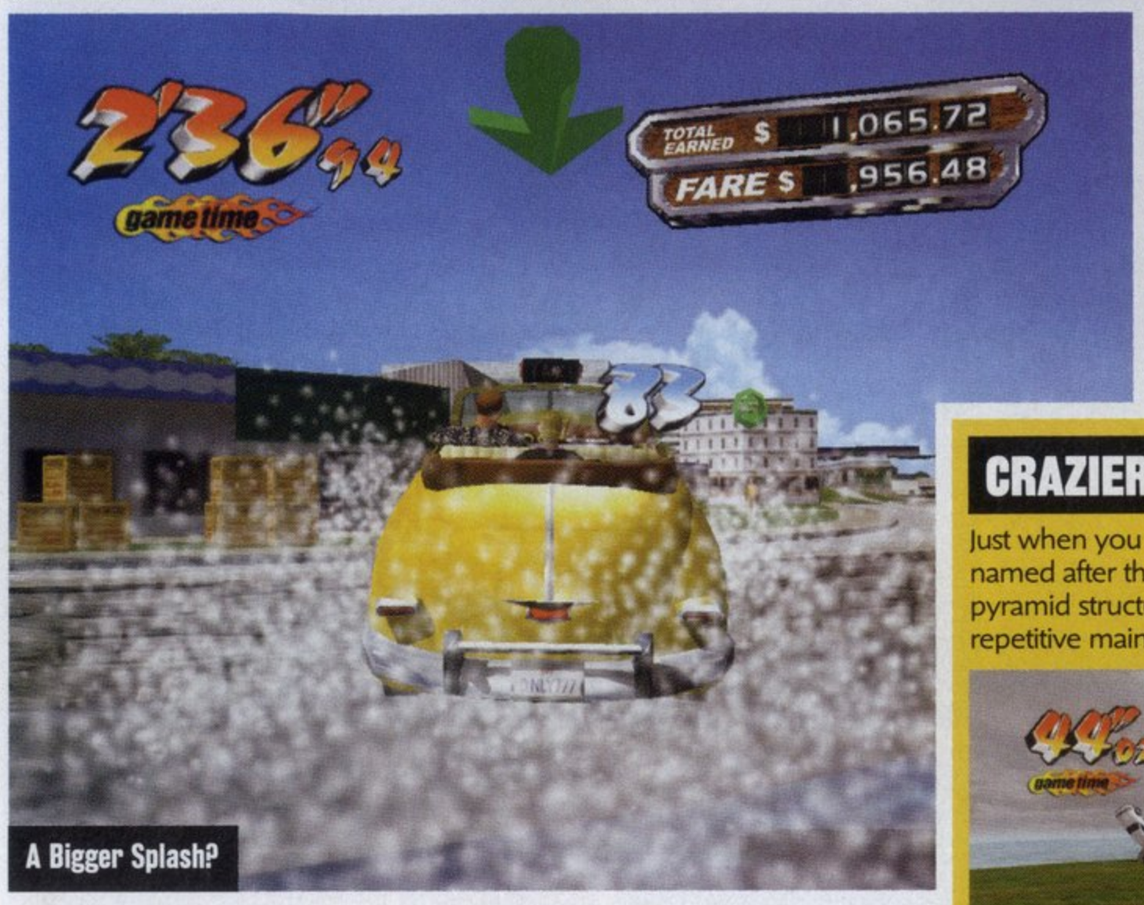
- Supported resolutions: **640x480 up to 1280x960**
- Scaleable options: **None**

VERDICT: **No disrespect to Strangelite (misspelled as Strangleite in one of the splash screens), the developers who handled the conversion from Xbox to PC, but how many games these days have *no* scaleable options? Granted, the resolution options will be necessary if you're on the minimum spec, but it's not smooth on a mid-range PC at a moderate resolution.**



Crazy X challenges quickly get tough.

Crazy Dash provides an essential speed boost.



A Bigger Splash?

CRAZIER THAN THOU

Just when you thought things couldn't get any crazier, *Crazy Taxi 3* brings you... Crazy X! Presumably named after that mysterious 'generation' so fond of 'xtreme' sports and sugary drinks, this double-pyramid structure of 25 mini-challenges offers so much variety that it's a refreshing change from the repetitive main game. Shame, then, that some are monstrously tough while others are rather easy.

Crazy Tornado is a good one, demanding that you dodge hurtling vehicles thrown about, as it were, by a tornado, en route to a clifftop destination.

Crazy Ball, meanwhile, requires your vehicle to leap and knock a disco mirrorball 10 times. Someone, somewhere, thought this would be fun.

to offer another mode in which to get your cabbie kicks? Either way, it's another partial success. Crazy X (see 'Crazier Than Thou') is a series of unlockable mini-challenges that effectively teach you how to use manoeuvres accurately, thus improving your performance in the game as a whole.

Some people argue that games have shifted over the years from essentially constituting a series of hurdles to be overcome, to forming an experience to be enjoyed. *Crazy Taxi 3* is almost sub-*Asteroids* in that its challenge is one-dimensional and, crucially, does not get harder as you progress. Aside from Crazy X – a frippery which, a cynic might suspect, was added to pad out the feature list – your goal is simply to earn as much money through efficient driving as possible. *CT3*'s ideas of a reward system

"Simply earn as much money as possible."

is a driving licence grade system: the best efforts, naturally, are rewarded with a rating of 'Crazy'. With nothing in the main game to actually unlock, playing this can seem an aimless, slightly pointless experience – like trying to dance in a club that's too well-lit and too quiet while you're too sober. Strangely, at $1 or $2 a go in an arcade it'd be great. But at home, with unlimited play on your PC, it's strangely unfulfilling.

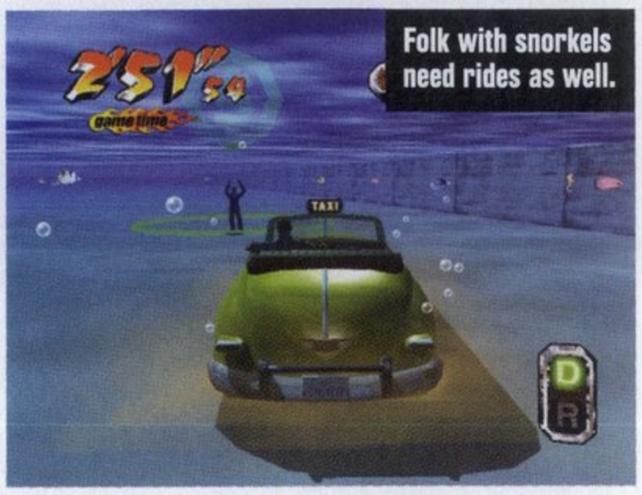
But... but. Every time I go back to playing *Crazy Taxi 3*, I see or hear something that surprises me. Each city, while certainly lacking the vivacity and genius of design of *Vice City*, has hidden corners. I like the tongue-in-cheek stereotypical passengers; the trios of identical musclemen, the pairs of mime artists, the Japanese businessmen. I love the shouted requests for a cab and the almost old-school animation of an agitated fare. Still, in a post-*Vice City* world, *Crazy Taxi 3* remains a slim proposition.

ROSS ATHERTON

PCGA PROFILE

Crazy Taxi is:
- **Mazy Taxi**
- **Hazy Taxi**
- **Lazy Taxi**

Crazy Taxi is not:
- **Driving Miss Crazy**
- **Jalfrezi Taxi**
- **Crazy Taxes**



Folk with snorkels need rides as well.

■ Publisher **Empire** ■ Developer **Sega/Strangelite** ■ Minimum System **PIII 1GHz, 256Mb RAM, DX 9 3D card** ■ Recommended **1.6GHz, 512Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **None**
■ Web Address **www.empireinteractive.co.uk** ■ Release Date **Out now**

PC GAMES addict
Its vigour is undimmed by the years, but we need more depth than this.
70%

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Midtown Madness
An oldie but still cracking urban silliness. Madness: clearly better than craziness.

GTA: Vice City
A similar taxi mode makes up less than 1% of this classic: the gulf in class is vast.

GENRE: FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

VIETCONG FIST ALPHA

Back into the jungle for a second campaign. Can *Vietcong* answer the *Call of Duty*?

Don't fall off the Wagner.

If you crawl into the woods today, you're in for a big surprise

Defend the village, and its residents offer support.

DON'T INHALE

Although this isn't the first game where your character huffs and wheezes when you're sprinting through the jungle, it's surprising just how far Pterodon take it. It's almost anti-recording studio – your character actually coughs when making radio reports and ordering the troops into position. A tiny, beautiful, touch.

PCGA PROFILE

Vietcong Fist Alpha is:
- **Sweat-inducing**
- **Green Beret**
- **Better than *Vietcong***

Vietcong Fist Alpha is not:
- **Pretty**
- **Stand-alone**
- **As good as *Call of Duty***

Veteran

IT was *Vietcong* that made foliage fashionable. Rather than presenting the traditional FPS fare of linear box corridors and buildings, it attempted to knock down the walls, cover the floor with brush, and drape lianas over everything. It almost worked. The good news: *Fist Alpha* demonstrates what *Vietcong* could have been. The missions that grace this expansion are far superior to those released a year ago. The bad news: a truly hideous ambush of glitches and game crimes await.

Let's focus on the good. The first *Vietcong* demonstrated an absolute lack of understanding of how to pace a game. Patrols were essentially extended firefights through green corridors. Now, you go from dense undergrowth to open areas, shooting across valleys, getting the drop on ambushes, sniping at Charlie in the undergrowth.

In one outstanding level, you're flown over a munitions factory based in an abandoned temple, manning the machinegun on the side of the Huey, pouring lead, sealing foxholes. The pilot then sets you down 500 metres away. Now you have to crawl, under fire, on your belly, back to the temple. The undergrowth is your frond. It's a gorgeous piece of design: you have to drill into the enemy from the air first, or the assault just won't succeed.

But. It's too hard. Pterodon seem to expect Vietnam veterans to play this, so expect a high body count. Mostly yours. There's instant death, horrific numbers of enemy troops and masses of camouflage. Yet again, you find yourself either firing at bushes hoping for a

"Now you have to crawl, under fire, on your belly."

cheap kill, or up-close and personal. There's absolutely no in-between. When things get too close, you can now pitch a bayonet into the flesh of an aggressor. At times, you feel like you're taking part in the Kobayashi Maru simulator, bombarded from every angle, with mortars dropping, fire zipping overhead. When you're asked to repel a dawn raid on your camp, it's genuinely terrifying. Your only targets are muzzle flashes and glimpsed movement.

Vietcong's failings have become far more apparent since *Call of Duty* sharpened our critical eye. Faults that might have been skimmed over in 2002 now can't be ignored. The path-finding of your team is unforgiveably abominable as usual. Occasionally, your scout gets stuck in feedback loops, forever cycling animations. Ooh, he's climbing. No, he's crawling. Now he's circling on his tiptoes, round and round. It's more than a little frustrating when you're relying on him to guide you through the jungle.

When *Fist Alpha* comes together, it's genuinely entertaining. There are so many little touches that take you past the rough polygon edges and dated visuals (see 'Don't Inhale'). But that effort and ambition is whittled away by nasty, obscure little bugs. Two Vietnam campaigns, and still no winner. This war is really dragging on.

TIM EDWARDS

■ Publisher **Take Two** ■ Developer **Pterodon** ■ Minimum System **Pentium III 700, 256Mb RAM, 16Mb 3D card**
■ Recommended **P4 1GHz, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **Internet, LAN, up to 16**
■ Web Address **www.vietcong-game.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Vietcong: Purple Haze
The original game and this expansion in one handy package.

Call of Duty
The first-person shooter of last year. Mud-spattered WWII perfection.

PC GAMES addict

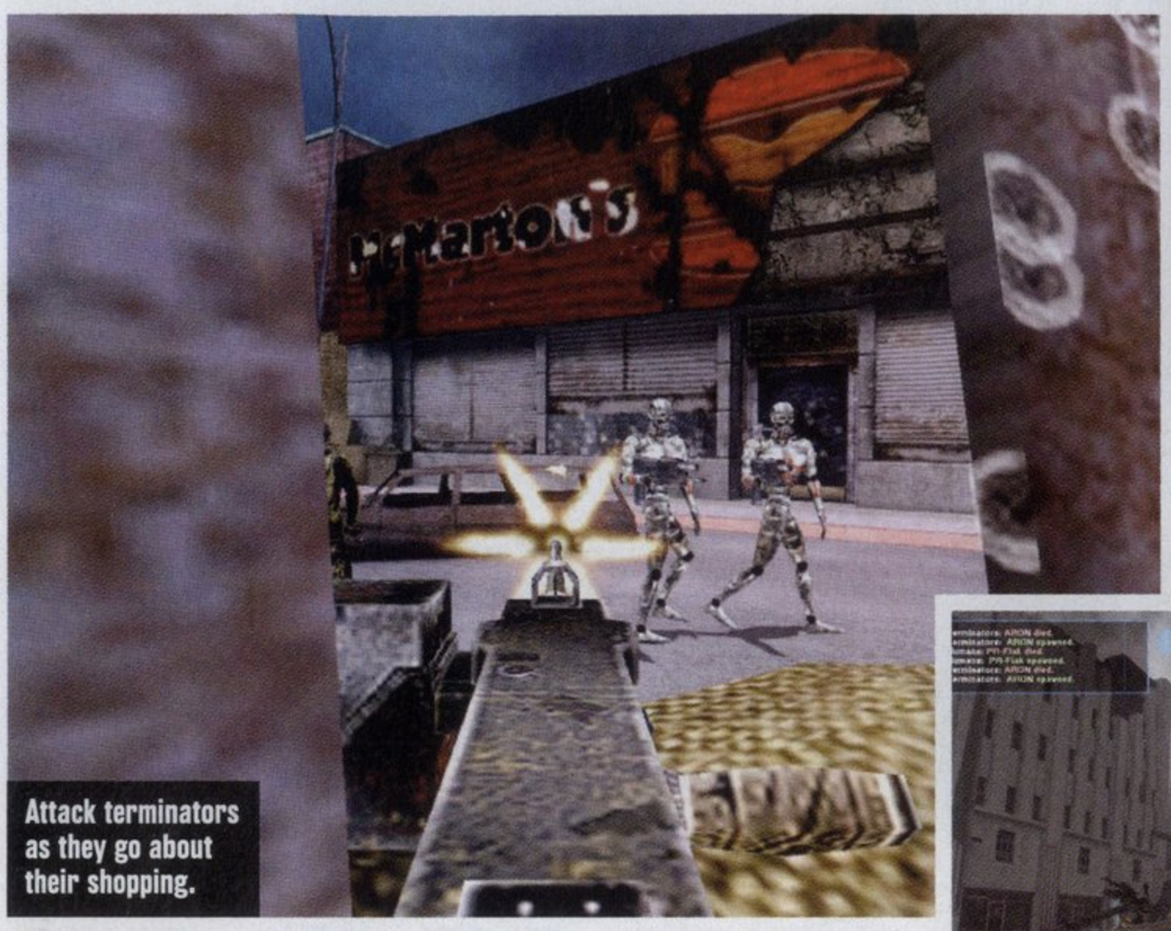
A 'nam vet with a few good stories to tell. But ultimately, this is damaged goods.

68%

GENRE: FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

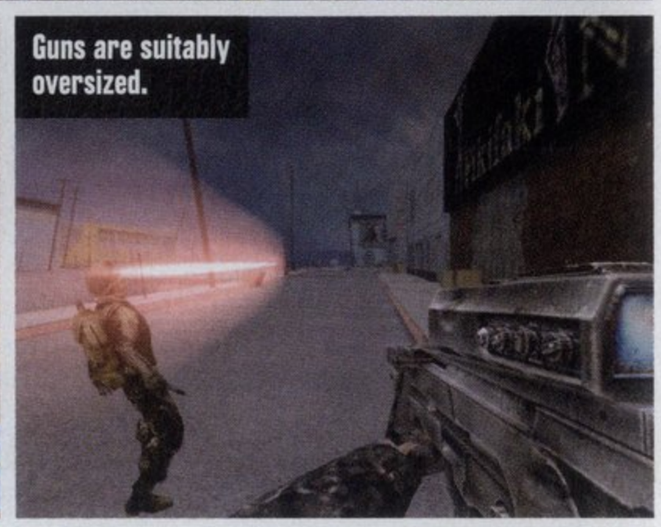
TERMINATOR 3 WAR OF THE MACHINES

It's enough to make your computer want to blow up the whole world, or something.



Attack terminators as they go about their shopping.

Just like the beginning of Star Wars. Don't you think?



Guns are suitably oversized.

CATCHING PHRASE

We love Arnie. And we're not just fans, we're actually in love: we worship Conan, we laugh heartily with the gaffs of Kindergarten Cop. We even like End of Days (kinda), and so it's understandable that many other people might buy this on the basis of their Arnie-love. But that would be a mistake, since the only real reference to the great man is a voice sample in which Arnie-Terminators utter, when spawning, "I'm back". It's really not very good. He's been 'motion captured' for the game too. Like that was difficult...

IN the head of every man, there is a list of do's and don'ts. In my own head, just after 'never smoke onions', comes the adage: 'never pick a fight with a Terminator'. It seems so obvious: if I ever come face-to-face with the metal-skeleton Arnies, I will run and hide, blubbing like an onion chef. The Terminator is worthy of its name because it is nothing less than a double-hard bastard. And yet, somehow, *Terminator 3: War of the Machines* (which is not the game of the film *as such*) fails to convey this singular fact.

It's a sad day when videogames can't even deliver this fundamental truth.

The point is this: the rebels are fighting a hit-and-run war against ultra-tech Cyberdyne death machines. It is a bleak future, where Tech-Com, as they are known, must employ human cunning and a few laser guns to battle the might of hunter-killer robots. *T3* (the game) doesn't even try to paint this convincingly. OK, so it manages to create a pretty good post-apocalypse Downtown LA, as well as nine other suitably militaristic settings. But it also pushes us into a contrived multi-player environment in which the machines and the humans are roughly equal in combative ability. In fact, after having now played the game at length, I'm beginning to suspect that the humans (complete with their 'Arnie' allies) might actually be more powerful. It's ludicrous. We want to be scared of the Terminator-folk, but we are not.

Fight in this bland cemetery.

Worse still, is there any sign of the morpho-clever liquid metal type new Terminators from the second and third films? Nope. Not a peep.

Even if we totally ignore what this game could, or should, have been, we are still faced with a vacuous piece of gaming half-wittery. Authentic sound effects and a motion-captured Arnold Schwarzenegger do not a rich and rewarding game make. What is actually required is a little imagination and a little more creative risk.

"A vacuous piece of gaming half-wittery."

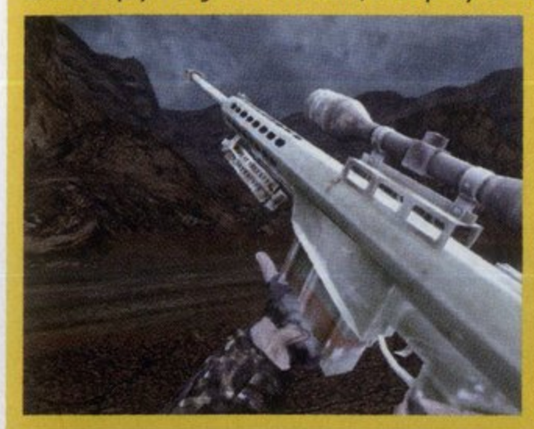
To put it simply, *T3* is half a game. Like Arnie, but without the metal endoskeleton: it lacks substance. While some first-person shooters focus on multi-player only, and that's fine, those that do so tend to try and offer a large, gratifying swathe of experiences for you to enjoy, as *Battlefield 1942* and *PlanetSide* do. If they don't, then they'd better be unmistakable and brilliantly designed, like *Quake III*. *T3* is indeed a first-person shooter focused on its multi-player ambitions, but it does not fulfil any of our other requirements, such as *being any good*.

There's a vague attempt to create interest in the game by making it more than just a straight run-around-with-guns-again. For instance, there are the dodgy vehicles. Yeah, they're rubbish, less like *Halo*'s Warthog than simply moveable bits of scenery. And if the buggies do a roll, what happens? They *vanish*. You know, like when a rally car goes into a roll? It vanishes completely, doesn't it? That's right. I'll give a few points for the robots' towering death machines, but that's all. The rest of the vehicles are no good.

Nor, in fact, will I be doing much cheering for *War of the Machine*'s class-based team system. The machine players get to be rolling gun platforms, or flying drones that look like radio-controlled

MEN, ROBOTS AND THEIR ORDNANCE

Here we take a close up look at the weapons that make this game possible. Shy creatures that usually shun the limelight, guns are deeply religious animals, that pray to the giant bazooka saint for a good oiling, and a dependable accuracy ratio.



Perhaps the Sniper? A sneaker, with a great hat, this fellow has got a big rifle that needs plenty of reloading and provides long-distance cover. Lovely.

Shiny, angry, stompy: the Terminators must be the choice of many a gentleman of war. These fellows aren't tough, but they have an acceptable laser rifle.

Heavy Weapons Dude has to be about the most poorly animated chap we've seen for years. Don't worry though, since he has an enormous chaingun to boot.

Work as a tight group.

Makes you feel like being in your local Quasar centre.

If only we could *talk* to the terminators...

Big guns don't always equate to big fun.

Fudgement

helicopters, or standard terminators, or the unfleshed terminators that you see blowing stuff to bits in the future-apocalypse sequences of the films. Each character-class has a different gun, speed, resilience, and so on. The humans get gun-toting Arnies, bazooka chaps and a couple of other folk with machineguns. None of this adds up to anything tactically interesting, as you get in, say, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*'s class system.

Nor is the combat intense or exciting enough for these flaws to be forgivable. The actual battle experience is one of the most forgettable of recent times. The weapons are about as exhilarating as elastic bands, and there's no recoil effect at all. It's just point and shoot. In fact we're so used to recoil being built into game weaponry it was at first hard to work out what was missing. Instead, there was just the strange awareness that something was wrong, that the game didn't sit quite right... weird.

Even more disconcerting is the unsuccessful attempt to tie in corpse-physics to the dying game characters. Terminators fall over backwards when shot to hell with an M60, dropping with

"When the buggies do a roll, they *vanish*."

about as much inertia as a Marks & Spencer's clothes mannequin nudged off balance by a small child. They wobble awkwardly on the ground before disappearing. Humans are also unconvincing in death, and collapse towards the ground like a cardboard man sagging in a heavy downpour. Kinetic animation is an advance apparently unknown to *War of the Machines*.

Another thing that reeks of ropey cash-in is there's only one game type. There's no deathmatch, or assault, or capture the flag, or any of the modes that make games such as *UT2004* or *Halo* worthwhile. Instead, there is just a simple domination-based mode. The teams score by capturing spawn points across the map. The more that are held, the more points the teams score. This might have worked well if the maps were tactically more interesting, or if there was some other element within the game that worked really well, but, as it is, this game doesn't even scrape the benchmark set by the old and defunct *Mobile Forces*. (Remember that? I do.)

I mean, for the *love* of time travel, *Natural Selection* is better continued over

PAST IMPERFECT

Some of *War of the Machine*'s levels are set in the future and in the past, with two versions of the exact same location. There are two ways of looking at the double-up levels: either they're an imaginative attempt at riffing off the theme of the films, or, it's a blatant exercise in cutting corners, practically halving the amount of mapping that needed to be done. Hmm. It's *so* difficult to decide which it is...

TICK-TOCK TACTIC

There are a number of tactics available to you in-game, but here's the most significant: as time progresses, the team with the most bases under its control begins to get a lead in points. However, it's not a good idea to respawn at the front line the whole time, as enemies will swiftly be able to move past your position and capture bases you've left unguarded. Calamity.

The canyon is an intense firefight.

SYSTEM MISER

How *War of the Machines* will play on *your* PC

- Supported resolutions: **640x480 to 2046x1536**
- Scaleable options: **Texture quality, geometry**

VERDICT: ***T3*** **at least demands little of your machine and high-spec beasts will happily run the game at a high resolution, with everything turned to eleven. Lower end PCs will be able to run it looking respectable too, but that's mainly because it never looked very good in the first place. Judging by visuals alone, this is a game that could (or should) have come out years ago.**

Shoot your mates in the leg. Please.

than *War of the Machines*. And that's a just a *Half-Life* modification.

Such mods don't have single-player elements though, and *T3* does. That single-player element being the multi-player levels, populated by rather inept AI fellows, who awkwardly run about and shoot and die, without really making much difference to the way the game is going. In all honesty, it's possible to play a ten-minute game of single-player *T3* where nothing much happens except a continual respawn-and-death cycle around a couple of the choke-points on the map. Rubbish. That said, it's possible for anyone with any gaming skill whatsoever to be *so* much better than the AI on either side that the game is a pushover, every time. This is no fun at all.

Worse still, if you're a Terminator, you have to walk everywhere. And I don't mean that you don't get to use vehicles (the robo-tanks are actually pretty decent), I mean you *walk*: running is not possible. If this had been because, like in the films, you were a preposterously tough death machine who had no inclination to run anywhere because you were PRACTICALLY INDESTRUCTIBLE, it

"You are doomed to ramble at a steady pace."

would have been understandable. Instead, you are simply a relatively threatening death machine who dies easily and is doomed to ramble at a steady pace. And that's not good enough.

Of course, play is noticeably better in the multi-player game, but then that's the point, isn't it? Everything is better when it involves real-live human beings, with brains and stuff. What this experience boils down to is that *Terminator 3: War of the Machines* is a team-based, class-driven multi-player shooter that looks like someone sent a robot back to 1997 to kill its mother... and didn't have a Hollywood muscle-man ready to come and save her. We get half a dozen games like this every year, and they never learn the lessons of their predecessors. Someone should do something.

Ultimately, the fact that this game has been out Stateside for quite some time, and there are still hardly any servers online, goes some way to suggesting that the lure of a Terminator game failed to disguise the lack of quality from the gaming public at large. Hasta La Vista, Arnie. This one doesn't deserve to live.

JIM ROSSIGNOL

PCGA PROFILE

War of the Machines is:
- **Sluggish**
- **Apocalyptic**
- **Empty**

War of the Machines is not:
- **Of the film**
- **Up to scratch**
- **What they want**

No, it's literally *this* much fun.

■ Publisher **Atari** ■ Developer **Clever's Games** ■ Minimum System **PIII 800, 128Mb RAM, 3D card**
■ Recommended **1GHz CPU, 256Mb RAM, GeForce 3+, broadband** ■ Multi-Player **LAN, internet, up to 32**
■ Web Address **www.t3war.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

PCGAMES addict
Not what we wanted from Arnie. We doubt he'll be back after this one in a hurry.
40%

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Halo
We're simply in love with this one. Simple and filling, like a tasty multi-player pie.

PlanetSide
If you missed this, then investigate it right now. There's no excuse. Absolutely. None.

GENRE: ACTION ADVENTURE

LEGACY OF KAIN DEFIANCE

In which we stick our necks out and say "Worst vampire game, ever!" Fangyouverymuch.

Kissy kissy.

I'm surrounded. By food!

The Soul Reaver. Fear him.

LARA LAUGHS?

There's a subtext here that you should note. Following the disaster that was *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness*, Eidos wrested control of Lara Croft's fate away from her creators, Core, and left her in the nurturing arms of Crystal Dynamics, the chaps responsible for this effort. Let's hope for improvements.

THE PC *can* do platform games. *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* reminded us of that. Our passion for leaping and bounding was re-ignited. It didn't feel rehashed. We didn't hurt ourselves falling down pits, or feel frustration at missing that final platform. For the first time in a long while, we could enjoy motion. *Legacy of Kain: Defiance* is the comedown from that high – where we slump back into our chairs, waiting for the next hit.

It's also a bit of an oddity. It's the latest in the *Soul Reaver/Legacy of Kain* series that has been intermittently clogging up the charts for the past couple of years. But, in a twist, you can now play as both of the star characters: Kain, the blood-sucking vampire wrapped in zombie flesh, and his nemesis, the soul reaver Raziel.

The ways in which these two characters interact with their environments provides the variety that we've come to expect. Kain is a meat-eater extraordinaire, a vampire with a taste for the Atkins diet. He spends most of his time plunging his fangs into flesh, or draining the blood of chained and helpless civilians. He's all about the combat. Raziel, by contrast, has the uncanny ability to flip between planes of existence – between the living world and the realm of souls. To progress as Raziel, you need to exploit the minor differences between the two places; if you're stuck at the bottom of a dry well in the spirit land, slip into the world of the living and swim your way to the surface.

This is clever, neat design. Crystal Dynamics have experience in this genre, and it shows. The puzzles they present to you are engaging, even occasionally beautiful. You're always facing new challenges and new concepts to take on board. You begin to exploit Kain's skill of telekinesis, picking up your opponents and skewering them on scenery, or flinging them off narrow, spiralling walkways. It sounds almost fun, doesn't it?

"A vampire with a taste for the Atkins diet."

Now it's time to bare fangs. *LoK: Defiance* is let down by the worst in-game camera I've ever seen. It's a gaming abomination that drifts from left to right, causing grief with every twitch. It's not uncommon for you to be running across a bridge, only for your viewpoint to shift gradually to the left or right. But the controls don't adapt, so before you know it you've walked Kain off into the abyss. Then you swear a bit, try again, rinse and repeat. Not funny.

If it weren't for the camera, I could almost recommend this. But such a doddering, disastrous camera taints all the hard work the developers have clearly poured into this. And that sucks.

TIM EDWARDS

PCGA PROFILE

Legacy of Kain Defiance is:
- Schizophrenic
- Bloody
- Disappointing

Legacy of Kain Defiance is not:
- Able
- Rossferatu
- For haemophiliacs

■ Publisher **Eidos** ■ Developer **Crystal Dynamics** ■ Minimum System **PIII 700, 128Mb RAM, 32Mb GeForce**
■ Recommended **P4 1.3GHz, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb GeForce 3** ■ Multi-Player **None**
■ Web Address **www.eidosinteractive.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Prince of Persia: SoT
High kickin' and flippin' platform action. A minor classic.

Max Payne 2
One of the coolest videogames in living memory. Violence as catharsis.

PC GAMES addict
A pale, pasty platformer that pongs slightly of garlic. Stake this game.
52%

GENRE: ROLE-PLAYING

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS HORDES OF THE UNDERDARK

Or *Need for a Potion of Speed: Underground*. Possibly.

(Above) Two henchmen plus summoned creatures can take the heat off the single-player, but it's still not easy.

You'll need all of *Underdark*'s new abilities to face down this chap.

Co-operative play is the way forward.

QUIET AT THE BACK

Hordes **provides much more dialogue for your henchmen, making them feel more like standard RPG companions. Worthy of particular mention is the reappearance of Deekin the kobold, who will be familiar to players of *Shadows of Underdark*. Now you can have two henchmen, they'll talk amongst themselves (sometimes hilariously) in addition to offering advice, and pitching into other people's conversations.**

As any Editor will tell you, you can issue orders to your henchmen until you're blue in the face, but that doesn't mean they'll be followed. It's probably a good job Mark's instructions normally concern tea-making and PR-savaging rather than destroying armies of golems or deactivating lethal traps. In this second expansion for *Neverwinter Nights* the stakes are higher, and although it more than matches the role-playing stakes of the original in most departments, the 'friendly' AI still has the power to aggravate any leader of men.

More on that later, though. This is, after all, the end of a mini-era, so let's give it some due regard. Bioware worked long and hard on *Neverwinter Nights*, a game which hubristically aimed to offer peerless single-player, multi-player, Dungeon Master-co-ordinated adventuring *and* module design. It all worked, but we gamers are a lazy bunch and it was largely left to Bioware themselves to create stories that did justice to the unwieldy technology.

Danger: he means to have you.

This, the final official *Neverwinter Nights* adventure, achieves that goal, distilling all the developers have learned about character, quest and level design, puzzles and pacing. The story is tight, keeping lengthy dialogue to a minimum and avoiding the best-known cliches of the genre. Events unfold almost exclusively underground, as your hero must descend through intensely challenging dungeons; complex puzzles, trap-laden corridors and difficult set-piece battles are the norm down here.

"Puzzles, traps and difficult set-piece battles."

D&D experts will be familiar with the dungeon muggers who lurk within: beholders, illithids, drow and more. The 15 or so new enemies are sparingly used but help raise the difficulty to armour-soiling levels – mind you, some worthy opponents are necessary as characters themselves can now progress to 'epic' levels (up to level 40 for the power-hungry gamer).

Much of the scenery will be familiar too, as the tilesets retain the classical gothic look of the game, despite additions and tweaks. Equally, there is a limit to how much the scripting and environment can be reinvented, and sometimes the cracks show. In-game cut-scenes, for example, are initially impressive, but the animation routines are limited and character graphics are basic when seen close-up.

Happily, nothing that made *Neverwinter Nights* great is missing. Control over your own character's special abilities is good (despite the new abilities meaning ever more options). The game is still pleasingly simple to control and it looks lovely despite the 'I Love 1998-ness' of the engine. The diversity is also impressive. Play as a Druid, as I did for much of this expansion, and the options open up: use animals for information and allies, or spot tracks to give clues. In particular, opting for one of the new classes (see Top of the Class) introduces more possibilities.

The interface is still excellent, which is remarkable considering the complexity of the game and its D&D basis. Bioware have been busy tweaking the game since its 2002 release. A slightly freer camera makes these lovely screenshots possible (hey – hit Print Screen to take your own, and 'H' to remove the interface). You can now take two henchmen with you, and you'll need to, with the escalated combat. Your control

TOP OF THE CLASS

Hordes adds six new classes to the five added by *SoU* and the eleven of the original: Red Dragon Disciple (dragon abilities), Weapon Master (huge combat bonuses), Champion of Torm (religious warrior), Pale Master, Dwarven Defender and Shifter. You'll need a few levels of a basic class to attain these prestige classes; here's a closer look at the latter three.

The Dwarven Defender gains more hit points and masses of combat bonuses, many reducing the damage he takes. An unsophisticated barrel of hit-points.

The Pale Master uses necromancy to gain combat bonuses (including a very cool undead arm), and has the ability to summon loads of undead.

The Shifter extends the Druid's ability to shapeshift to an extreme degree. At high levels it can become a minotaur, drider, wyrmling, mind flayer and many more.

Shifting to a different form confers new abilities.

Golems are immensely tough and resistant to most magic.

Orcs have never smelt so bad.

He's got his eye on you.

Horny beast seeks bear for no-hooks relationship.

SYSTEM MISER

How *Hordes of the Underdark* will play on *your* PC

- Supported resolutions: **800x600 to 2048x1536**
- Scaleable options: **16/32/64Mb texture packs, video quality, creature shadow detail, environment shadows, anti-aliasing, more.**

VERDICT: ***Neverwinter*** **still looks lovely, but bear in mind that at the epic levels this expansion brings, elaborate spell effects are flying around all the time, slowing things down even on machines approximating the recommended specs. Generous options and resolutions in particular help enormously, and anything resembling a modern graphics card will not struggle.**

over these henchmen (and summoned creatures) is, at least in theory, greatly expanded. You're able to direct their spellcasting and special abilities more closely, request bard songs and the like. However, pathfinding and friendly AI in general remains a problem, with creatures or henchmen occasionally scuttling off into the darkness like absent-minded Alzheimer's sufferers.

Worse, they'll sometimes refuse to attack at all, misinterpreting the supposedly specific instructions you've given them earlier. With so much effort apparently invested in this area, I wonder why we can't simply have complete control over henchmen, as in *Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic*.

But I digress, for we've come to an intriguing crossroads. Granted, RPGs, despite recent popularity, have never exactly been mainstream gaming. However, the small but vocal minority of serious role-players will always demand more challenge, more abilities, more features – and that's just what they get here. *Hordes of the Underdark* is an expansion which will please power gamers far more than casual gamers. The powers of weapon customisation, ever more esoteric magic items and set-piece battles pitched at a distinctly higher difficulty level than before, hold sway over accessibility. It often feels as though you're *supposed* to die in some battles, and must reload and prepare more thoroughly. Some people like that. If you don't, consider yourself warned.

Finally, and I'll never get tired of talking about this, the co-operative aspect of *Neverwinter Nights* remains a rare treat.

Boss

With ever more specialised characters, it makes more sense than ever to group together with other players to get the most from the dungeons that stretch out below. It's remarkably rewarding to play as part of a team: as a fighter protecting spellcasters, a cleric healing the fighters, a rogue clearing the way of traps and many, many more.

For co-operative fantasy role-playing, there's nothing finer. It's ironic, though, that in the more cutting-edge *KotOR*, Bioware have only succeeded in beating themselves in the single-player stakes.

ROSS ATHERTON

PCGA PROFILE

Hordes of the Underdark is:
- **Tough**
- **The end of the series**
- **Underground**

Hordes of the Underdark is not:
- **For beginners**
- **Short**
- **Womble free**

- Publisher **Atari** ■ Developer **Bioware** ■ Minimum System **1.5Gb HD space, Neverwinter Nights**
- Recommended **P4 1.3GHz, 512Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **LAN, internet, up to 64**
- Web Address **http://nwn.bioware.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Knights of the Old Republic
The best RPG for ages, and Star Wars done properly. Don't miss this one.

NWN: Shadows of Undrentide
Install this earlier expansion first and you'll get a few more classes and feats.

PC GAMES addict

A worthy but challenging conclusion to a mighty RPG series.

80%

MINISTRY XXVI

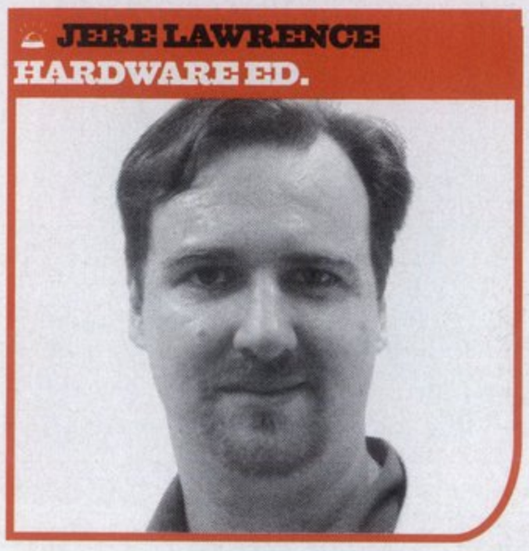
A short while ago in a galaxy not so far from you,
there was a magazine so full of the best music
interviews that people would travel light years to
buy it. Rather than engage your hyperdrive and
enter lightspeed to get a copy, all you have to do is
go to your local newsagent. Don't join the dark side,
join MINISTRY. Now with free lightsabre* .

MINISTRY
ON SALE MARCH 10

*Not strictly true

Hardware

Gear/Gadgets/Apps/Utilities Definitive reviews



JERE LAWRENCE
HARDWARE ED.

One giant leap for technology

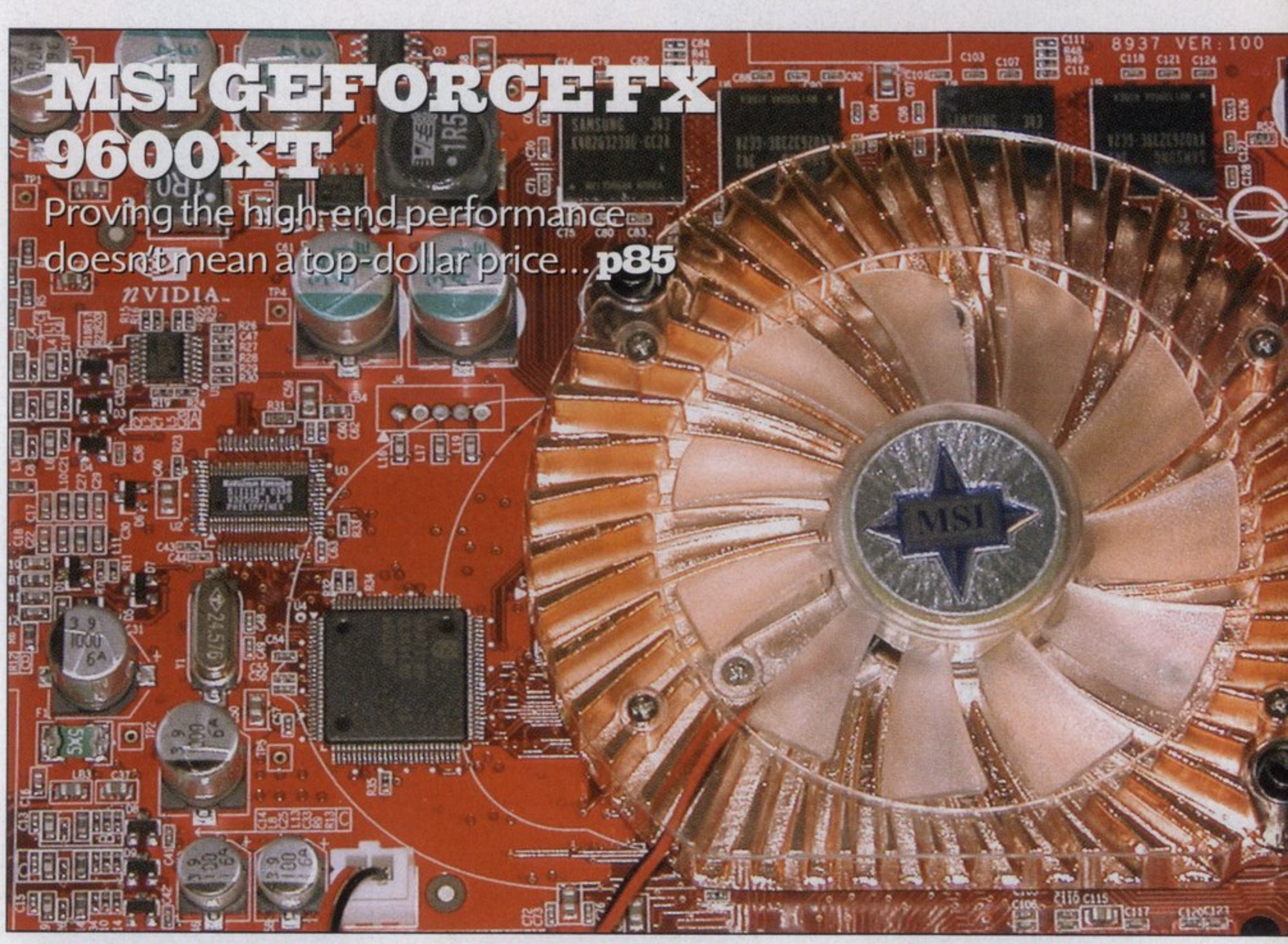
It was a time before I was born but I can still remember my parents talking about witnessing one of the most historic events of all time. On the 21st of July, 1969, It was "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind" and huddled around a dingy, sixties styled TV set, they and the rest of the country witnessed, in awe, the first human being ever to set foot on a foreign celestial body.

Now in 2004 we have super high resolution TFT LCD devices, 3+ GHz 64-bit processors, optical DVD burners and standardised inter-compatibility i.e. USB2 and Firewire. And yet it is not the thought of this hardware or even Half Life 2 that chokes me up, but rather my desktop wallpaper which displays boldly and proudly the recently named "Apollo 1 hills", a range of hills and mountains on Mars named to commemorate the bravery of the men who manned the first Apollo mission.

Considered "science fiction" in the decade that man landed on the moon we now receive our images directly from NASA connected by an International network of computers and at 5172 x 1385 pixels, Rover's image is a literal postcard of an alien planet. The eerie Red sky, the strange jagged rock formations and the lonely desolation of a Martian sunset.

Be proud gamers because we have been a part of the economics that allow for interplanetary travel. As games get more complex requiring faster processors and video cards we, as consumers, have invested (through product purchase) in hardware companies and with renewed capital allowed them to push the boundaries of video and data processing.

Jere Lawrence
Hardware Editor



MSI GEFORCE FX 9600XT

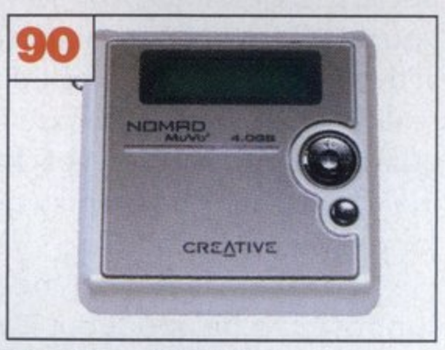
Proving the high-end performance doesn't mean a top-dollar price... **p85**

86

WD740 Raptor 74GB SATA
If you care about your gaming performance, you want this!

87

QPC-430W Power Supply
Perfect power solution for a PC that's just full of hot air...

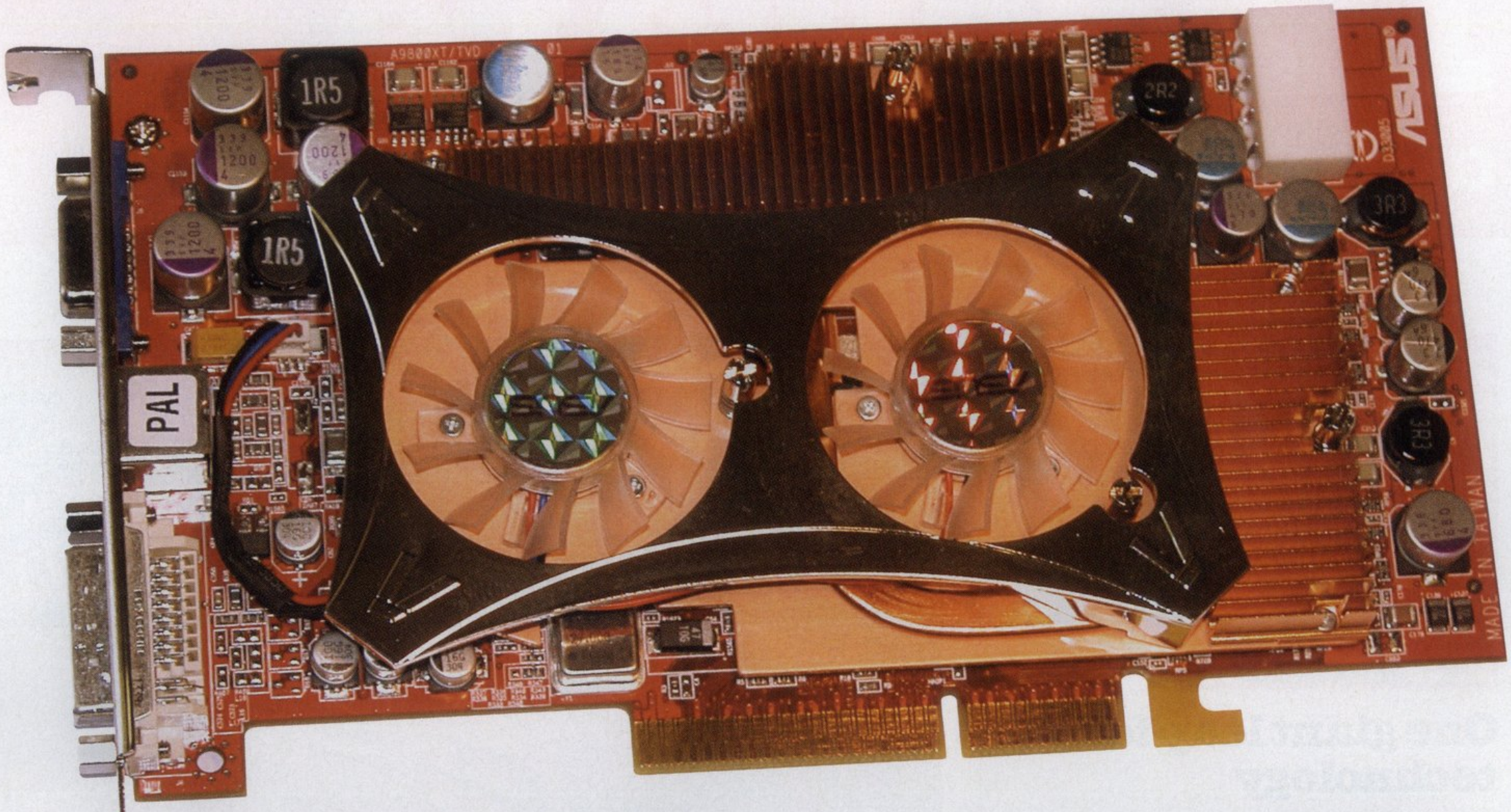


90

Creative MUVO 2
Can't bring yourself to buy an Apple device? No need to now!

MS WIRELESS OPTICAL ELITE

Have Microsoft really made the ultimate desktop kit?... **p93**



Asus Radeon 9800XT

It says right here on the box "Half Life 2 - Free game"

Ha! They lied is all I can say. Let's just hope that by the time you're reading this review *Half Life 2* has been released to critical acclaim and your lovely new video card will come with it all nicely burnt onto CDs. Because as it stands now the only *Half Life 2* (*HL2*) action you're going to get is using a coin to scratch away the activation code on the included coupon. The unfortunate reality is that if you purchase a 9800XT there is no guarantee you will get a packaged version of *HL2* inside and the coupon which you may get proclaims four to six weeks for delivery – ouch.

Performance is what the XT series of ATi's cards is supposed to be about but it was surprising to discover that the 9800XT wasn't quite the next generation of DirectX 9 card. For starters, ATi claimed that the new 0.13 micron manufacturing process would see core speed increases of around 100MHz but as the 9800XT runs at 412 / 730 (365 effective) there's only an effective increase of approximately 45MHz over the 9800 Pro. The next highly touted feature of the XT range is Overdrive, an automated overclocking function where a thermal diode on the GPU core reports the temperature and allows the Catalyst drivers to increase or decrease the speed of the card based on temperature. ATi even claimed that this new feature was specifically designed to aid in games like *TR:Angel of Darkness*, *Homeworld 2* and *X2*. The reality though was that this feature equated to a few frames per second difference and the only real performance increase came from the faster core. Once again this showed in DirectX 9 tests with 3D Mark giving a score of 6304 marks, only 9% faster than a 9800 Pro. Our final test used *X2: The Threat* and further confirmed that in terms of real world performance the 9800XT is 3-5 frames per second faster than a DDR2 9800 Pro.

Vivo (Video in Video out) is the other big function of the XT and is almost on par with the all-in-wonder (reviewed this issue) except the XT doesn't feature an RF input for antennae or cable TV. Of the inputs though there's S-video and composite so a VCR or video camera is easily captured. The provided capturing software, Digital VCR II is quite good and due to overlay mode, you can even play a game whilst watching TV on another monitor but unlike the all-in-wonder can't watch and/or record two channels at the same time. Video capture quality is extremely good as MPEG-2 quality video can be captured in real time and the provided "Game Face" software will allow for video conferencing, in game via an overlayed, translucent DirectX window. Of course there's nothing stopping you from using a VCR instead to watch TV and this also works quite well with the mini onscreen overlay.

The software bundle isn't too bad, you get two full games: *Battle Engine Aquilla* and *Gun Metal* plus the usual assortment of DVD playing and authoring utilities. The lack of *Half Life 2* however is quite a blow to this package, especially as 9800 Pros fall in price and with the savings you could buy your own copy of *Half Life 2* faster than sending away for it.

→Detail

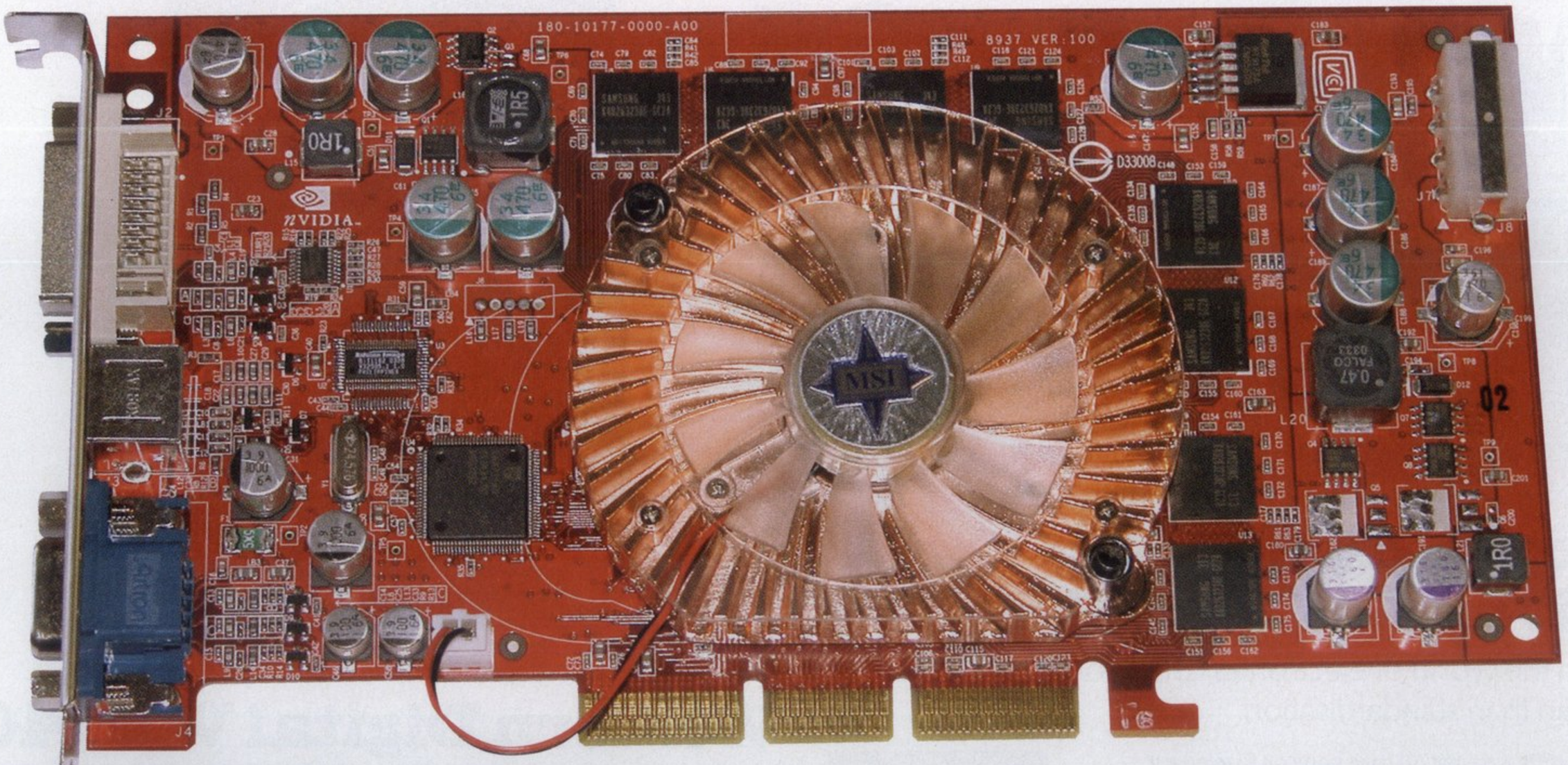
Memory: 256MB
Interface: 256-bit
Core clock: 411MHz
Memory clock: 365MHz (730 effective)
Outputs: DVI, 15-pin VGA, S-Video, Composite
Inputs: S-Video, Composite
AGP: 8x, 4x, 2x
Bundled Software: Battle Engine Aquilla, Gun Metal, Games sampler, Ulead Cool 3D, Photo Express, Asus DVD, Power Director Pro, Media Show, Half Life 2 (When available)
Price: $789
Distributor: Achieva
Web: www.achieva.com.au
Phone: (02) 9742 3288

PCGA Verdict

↗ Once again ATi generate the fastest consumer Video card available
↙ Still doesn't perform as could be hoped, DirectX 9 intensive games such as X2, Homeworld 2 still require low resolutions (1024x768) to run smoothly

Summary: Super fast performance plus Overdrive (auto overclocking) make this a video card that's hard to beat benchmark wise and yet the real world performance was only an increase of a few frames per second. VIVO is a welcome addition and makes this card perfect for anyone looking to upgrade to the best.

94%



MSI GeForce FX 5900XT

High end performance for a mid range price

It would seem that nVIDIA's new strategy in the highly lucrative video card market is to concentrate on bringing the price down of their mid to high end cards to a level where the average consumer can afford it.

This is exactly what the 5900XT is and unlike the ATi XT delineator, which represents the top of the range, nVIDIA's XT represents a video card with slower memory modules and a simplified PCB. Also, in the case of the 5900XT, nVIDIA are looking to sell as many of the NV35 GPUs as possible because it was recently announced that the NV4X chipset will be released in an effort to topple ATi's lead position. As a side we recently received specs of the NV4X GPU and it does indeed look good; 16 Pixel Units double that of other cards, even previous nVIDIA offerings, and there's support for ultra fast DDR3 memory. To top it off the NV4X has a core speed of 600MHz and an effective memory speed of 1.4GHz.

All distractions aside, the 5900XT is indeed quite the performer. A lot of this amounts to its clock speed of 400MHz, effective memory speed of 700Mhz and the upgrading of PCBs from 128-bit to 256-bit, which makes a massive difference at higher resolutions. In fact for all DX8.1 games the 5900XT can render them at the glorious res of 1600x1200 just about as capably as an ATi offering. We here at the PCGA labs do feel sorry for anyone that bought an original GeForce FX because it's only now that nVIDIA have refined their chipset to competitive levels. DirectX 9 performance however is prohibitive to resolutions greater than 1024x768 but in terms of 3D marks the 5900XT did extremely well benching closely to a 9800 Pro. But I personally have issues with benchmark results under nVIDIA drivers because I had *X2* report that the 5900XT was benching faster than a 9800XT even though I could see the jitters and pauses that the ATi card did not exhibit. Basically, while a 9800XT can hope for the occasional DirectX9 game that will render smoothly at 1280x1024 a 5900XT user will always be rendering at 1024x768. With that said, both cards perform particularly well at 1024 x 768. Another performance enhancing feature is MSI's exclusive Dynamic Overclocking Technology (D.O.T) which normally works extremely well but this time round drew an excessive amount of power, causing my PSU to overheat and my machine to shut down. That's not meant to discredit D.O.T. but as with all things overclocking, you have to be careful.

Another area where nVIDIA is lifting their game is in the realm of anti-aliasing but only in regards to performance. Although the NV35 GPU finally handles anti-aliasing without too massive a frame-rate hit (once again due to the 256-bit PCB) the quality of the anti-aliasing was quite poor with numerous more jaggies than the ATi offering.

But it's all about the price, because at around $380 AU this is one of the cheapest, high performance video cards available. They're not going to be around for long though because it's worth reiterating that the 5900XT is a means of moving NV35 GPUs before the release of the NV4X, and once that happens there'll be no more 5900XTs. If you need to upgrade your video card but don't want to pay for the very high end, get yourself a 5900XT, it's one of the best bargains out there.

→Detail

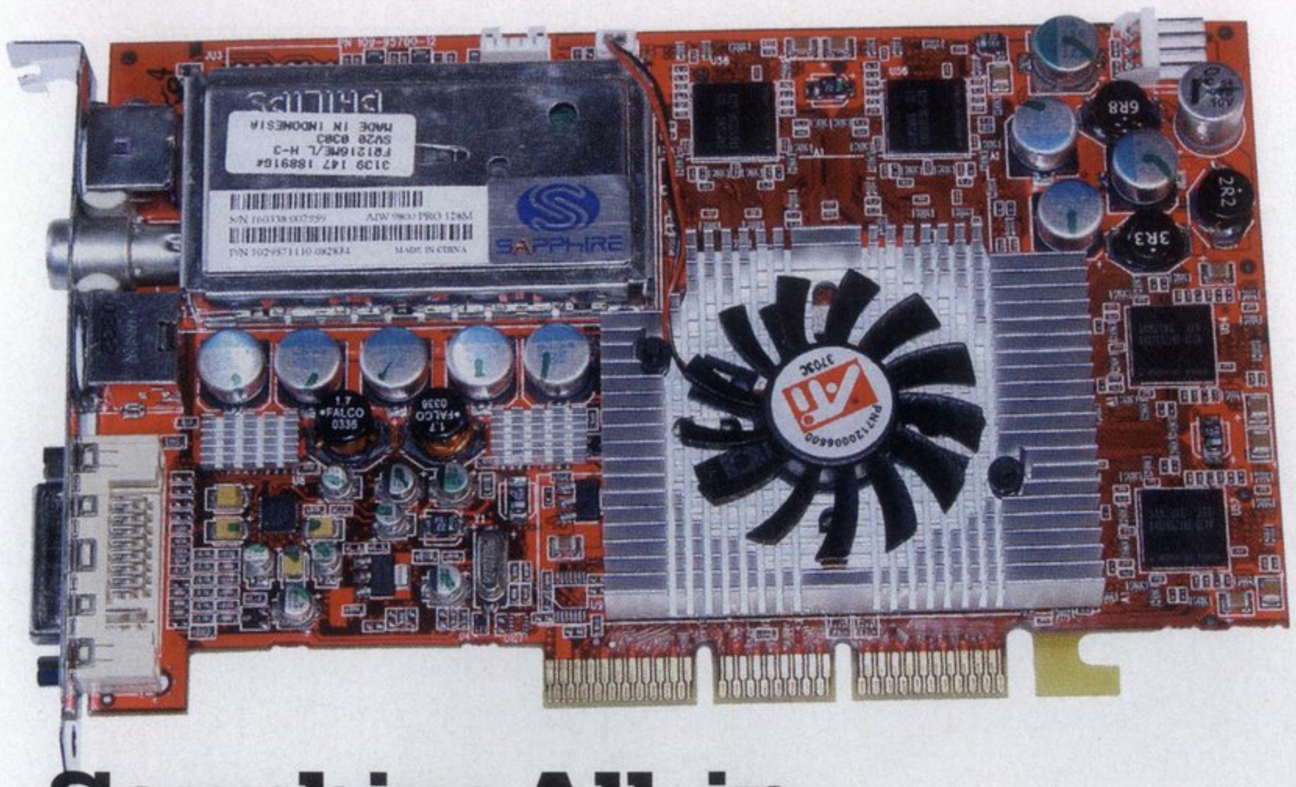
Memory: 128MB
Interface: 256-bit
Core clock: 400MHz
Memory clock: 350MHz (700 effective)
Outputs: DVI, 15-pin VGA, S-Video, Composite
AGP: 8x, 4x, 2x
Bundled Software: Ghost Recon, Morrowind, Game sampler CD, Win DVD with 5.1 sound support and Supreme Foreign Language learning machine
Price: $380
Distributor: MSI
Web: www.msicomputer.com.au
Phone: (02) 9748 0070

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ An extremely well performing, high end card at a mid range price
- ↙ nVIDIA's marketing department needs a damn good throttling for starting the "it works better with nVIDIA campaign" and calling their budget range "XT" in order to try and make it look like their "on-par" offering is half the price of ATi's.

Summary: The NV4X is nearing completion and to, errr, celebrate, nVIDIA are dumping as many of their NV35 (FX5900) GPUs onto the market as cheaply as possible in the form of the 5900XT. Performing fantastically they're a definite bargain but they won't be around for long.

97%



Sapphire All-in-Wonder 9800 Pro

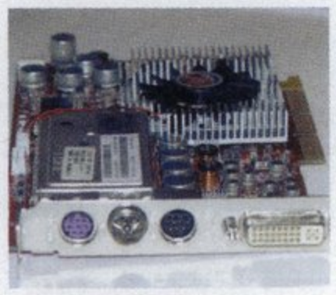
In the world of electronics confusion is much more fun than standardisation

Given that ATi have gone on to release the 9800XT with its own video capture abilities, it seems strange that an all-in-wonder product exists but there's always the case of affordability and these days it seems there's a video card aimed at every micro-segment of the market.

Essentially a 9800Pro with an RF receiver bunged on there are some subtle differences between the all-in wonder (AIW) and other 9800 Pro offerings. This though is primarily in the realm of memory as the AIW features only 128MB as opposed to 256MB and the memory isn't DDR2. Performance wise though these lacks didn't make a huge difference benching around 5% slower than an original DDR2 9800 pro and for all intents and purposes, the AIW is as exceptional as ever at higher resolutions.

For video capture and editing this card features a wealth of options starting with straight RF-in (TV) which can be decoded by the provided software. Using the provided breakout box there's also support for L/R RCA, S-Video and composite inputs. The quality of the captured video is extremely good but this card is full of surprises. With a multiple monitor setup it was at first quite cool to play a game on the main DVI screen while watching TV on the secondary CRT monitor but after a bit of fiddling with the included ATi software you realise that you can watch and record two programs at the same time on both monitors.

Completing the kit is a remote control and USB receiver that allows you to control your PC via remote. Not only is it able to launch standard applications, the prominent D-pad works as a mouse, making for some very comfy computing.



→Detail

Memory: 128MB
Interface: 256-bit
Core clock: 380MHz
Memory clock: 340MHz
Inputs: DVI, 15-pin VGA, S-Video, Composite
Outputs: S-Video, Composite
Tuner: Stereo TV with Teletext
Price: $559
Distributor: Achieva
Web: www.achieva.com.au
Phone: (02) 9742 3288

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ A prefect marriage between video card and video capture
- ↙ Has to compete with it's own big brother, the 9800XT which is only $150 more, is faster and can capture video as capably just without the remote control.

Summary: The high speed of the 9800 pro plus excellent video editing software that supports multiple monitors make this a dream video card for any one wanting to get into digital video. Cheaper than the 9800XT and comes with a remote.

92%

Western Digital WD740 Raptor 74GB SATA

Now with added speed and capacity, but no ninjas

In hardcore gaming circles one of the most popular high performance drives available has been the Western Digital Raptor. But with only a 36GB capacity, the original Raptor left those same users squeezed for storage space. Six months on, WD has doubled the capacity of the drive making this HD even more attractive, especially to gamers.

Spinning at an impressive 10,000 RPM (the average drive spins at 7200 RPM) the Raptor features an 8MB buffer and can access data on the platter incredibly quickly with an average of 4.5ms or 0.6 of a millisecond for track to track operations. These figures should impress existing Raptor owners, as the earlier 36GB drive had an average seek of 5.2ms and a track seek of 0.7ms.

With these kind of super fast mechanics the WD740 is going to perform well, but it was interesting to once again see just how much has been achieved. With a 55MB/sec average read and a burst rate of 78.3MB/sec the Raptors 36GB predecessor was blitzed by the newer WD740 with our tests showing an average read rate of 68.5 MB/sec and an incredible 88.7 MB/sec when bursting data. At those speeds, between two WD740s, you could transfer around 30 MP3/WMAs in one second and the loading time of any game is going to be greatly reduced.

If used on a non-SATA motherboard it's going to be necessary to adopt either an IDE to SATA converter or SATA PCI card. You won't however need a SATA power converter as the drive can take input from either power source.

→Detail

Formatted Capacity: 74,356 MB (decimal)
Interface: ESATA
Average Read Seek*: 4.5ms
Track to Track seek*: 0.6ms
Full Stroke read Seek*: 10.2ms
Rotational Speed: 10,000 RPM
Buffer: 8MB
*Result data is based on a decimal MB (1,000), not binary (1,024)
Price: $ 449
Distributor: Achieva
Web: www.achieva.com.au
Phone: (02) 9742 3288

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ Faster than its predecessor and one of the fastest SATA drives on the market
- ↙ The Raptor will reach perfection when it achieves the 250GB mark

Once again Western Digital show that they're one of the premier hard disk manufacturers in the world with this incredibly fast hard disk. Perfect for SATA RAID and even more perfect for hardcore gamers now that the Raptor offers 74GB of storage

97%

Western Digital 160GB USB2.0 External Hard Disk

For when you need a heck of a lot of storage space, on the run

These days re-configuring your PC or having to reinstall an Operating System is a major chore that can't be done simply and, speaking from experience here, it just plain hurts to have to scrap another perfectly tweaked OS and reinstall it because of a lack of disk space or an upgrade. One possible answer to this dilemma though is an external Hard Disk and with 160GB of capacity Western Digital could keep the reinstall demons at bay for quite some time.

Ideal as a repository for files like MP3s or movies, it's important to consider that this external drive won't be as fast as an internal ATA133 offering. This is due to a reliance on the SATA interface to transfer data and although the drive spins at 7200 RPM, the bus ultimately slows everything down. Performance wise, at USB1.1 the transfer rate is only around 7 MB/sec and even at the full speed of USB 2.0 an average data rate of 25 MB/sec is achievable which is about half the speed of an ATA133 internal drive.

Installation as could be expected is simple, especially under Windows 2000/XP where you don't even need a driver disk because the unit is recognised instantly as a USB Hard Disk. This simplicity of installation also makes it a very handy portable storage device and as it's covered in a hard, durable plastic, is tough enough to survive transportation and the general hazards of being on a desktop. Wherever it's going to be used though there will need to be a spare power point for it.

→Detail

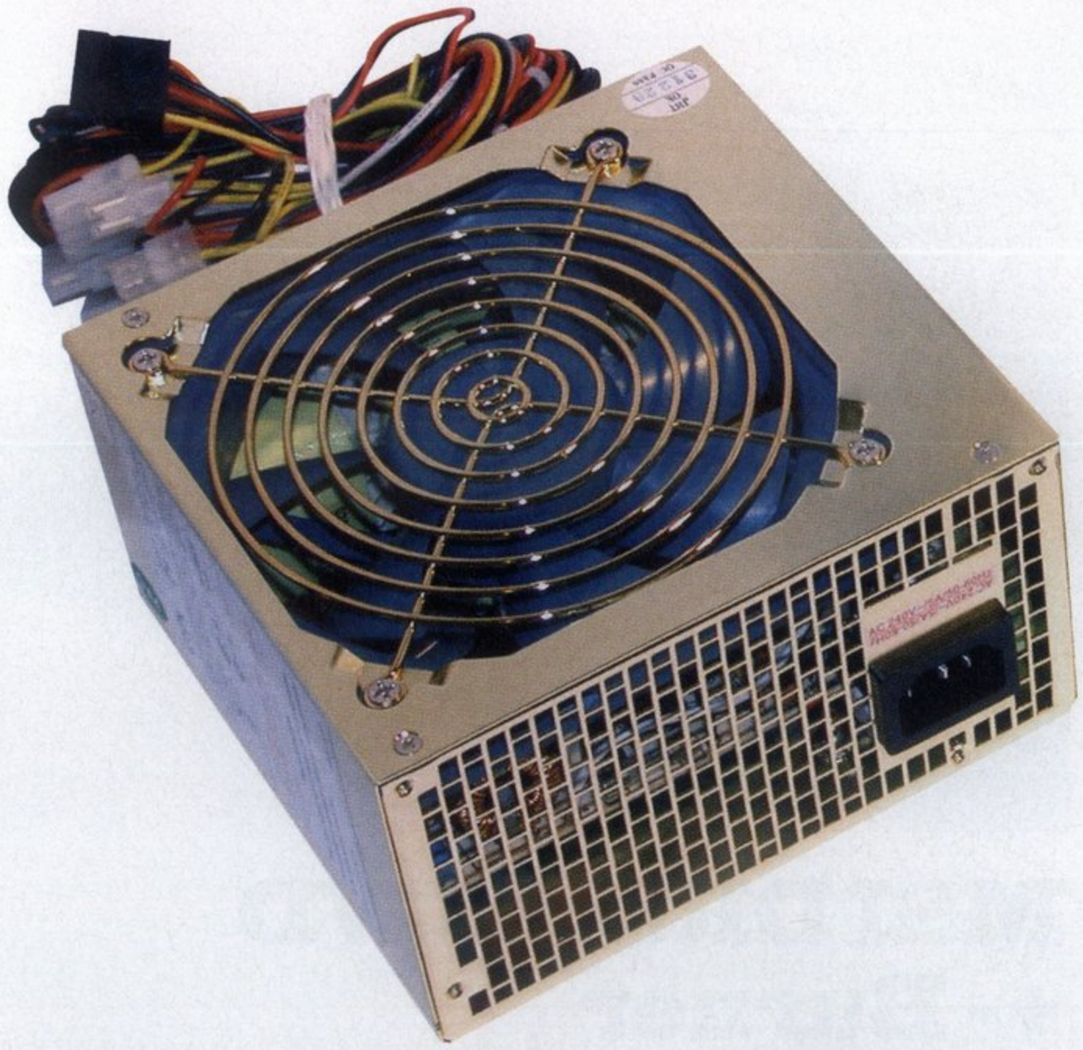
Rotational Speed: 7,200 RPM (nominal)
Buffer Size: 2 MB
Average Latency: 4.20 ms (nominal)
Read Seek Time (Average): 8.9 ms
Track-To-Track Seek Time (Average): 2.0 ms
Interface: USB 2.0
Maximum Transfer Rate: 480 Mbits/s
Price: $399
Distributor: Achieva
Web: www.achieva.com.au
Phone: (02) 9742 3288

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ Massive amounts of storage that's portable
- ↙ At 25MB/sec this drive is only half the speed because of the USB interface

Quite a reasonable solution for a user whose machine is full and requires further storage without having to "rip out and reinstall". Portability also makes it an ideal device for transferring large quantities of files between multiple systems.

93%



QPC "Superquiet" 430W Power Supply

In the modern PC it's all about air flow

For almost a decade now the average power supply unit (PSU) has remained relatively unchanged with the differences being in power output and gold spray painted frilly bits. These days though as CPUs remain relatively stable and with higher CPU core speeds taking longer to achieve, manufacturers are looking to maximise the cooling potential of the whole PC. This isn't just for overclockers either as good airflow is important in maintaining long life in a computer.

The most noticeable difference is that the back panel of the PSU is now one large grill so that air can be forced through by the huge 120mm square fan situated at the top. A boon to cooling your PC, the large fan which runs extremely quietly (thus the "superquiet" name) creates a large amount of airflow over the components of the PSU and with the afore mentioned grill at the back, hot air is literally blasted out.

Indicative to a design change sweeping across Asia, the lower wattage (400w) ISO power supply is also utilising this newer design with a 120mm fan up top and a grilled rear panel. When compared though, there is a difference between the ISO and QPC PSUs. The QPC PSU for one is painted gold and does live up to its "superquiet" name with quiet effective performance. The ISO PSU is housed in straight aluminium and admittedly was not that much louder. Both however performed stably and effectively.

→Detail

Cooling fan : 12cm top mounted fan
Wattage : QPC 430w, ISO 400w
Quiet operation: QPC Yes, ISO No
Protection: Over voltage, over current, over loading and output short circuit.
AC input range: 160V – 270V
Price: QPC $85, ISO $35
Distributor: Compuparts
Web: www.compuparts.com.au
Phone: 9482 2582

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ Great air flow for the next generation of power supplies
- ↙ Doesn't feature a female 3 pin monitor power connector on the back

If your PSU is a little noisy or rattly then it might be time to upgrade, finally power supplies are worth upgrading for.

92%

MSI DR8-A DVD +- Burner

VHS or Beta? Who cares when you can do it all anyway?

Surely one of the great advantages of the modern age of consumer electronics is that standardisation is less of a problem. You see once upon a time (that musically appears to be repeating on us) in the 80's, poor shmucks had to chose between competing standards; case in point, VHS and Beta. To cut a long story short, VHS won with Beta owners left to swallow the cost of a new VCR. But this time around, in the world of digital recording the two competing formats are the "+" (plus) and "-" (minus) formats. These days however we have companies like MSI who are happy to make a drive that supports both formats leaving the standardisation battle in the hands of media manufacturers like TDK and Kodak.

That said there are advantages to the differing formats. The DR8-A is listed as an 8x DVD burner but that is only if you're using DVD+R media. Using rewritable media (DVD+RW) brings the speed down to 4x with DVD-R maintaining a respectable 4x speed. And speedy this drive is for even at its slowest 4x speed it's possible to burn an entire 4.7GB DVD-R in around 15 minutes at 5540Kps. Obviously the showstopper is the +R format which can burn the same amount of data in 8 minutes and places this drive up there with the 50x CD burners.

Beyond its fast writing speed, the DR8-A hosts other nice features like "BURN-proof" which prevents buffer underruns and over burn abilities that allow the drive to write to the very edge of the disk for maximum storage. Another indicator that this drive will be popular with the burning enthusiast market is that it's firmware upgradeable, meaning that the drive can learn new tricks just by flashing its BIOS

→Detail

CD Write speeds: 40x CD-R, 24x CD-RW
DVD Write speeds: 8x DVD+R, 4x DVD+RW, 4x DVD-R, 2x DVD-RW
Read speed: 40x CD, 12x DVD
Buffer Size: 2MB
Bundled software: Nero burning ROM
BIOS: Firmware upgradable
Price: $259
Distributor: MSI
Web: www.msicomputer.com.au
Phone: 9748 0070

PCGA Verdict

↗ One more DVD burner in the "does it all" range
↙ Doesn't support DVD-RAM

With this drive able to support both competing DVD formats the competition between media manufacturers means you'll always be able to buy the cheapest media.

96%

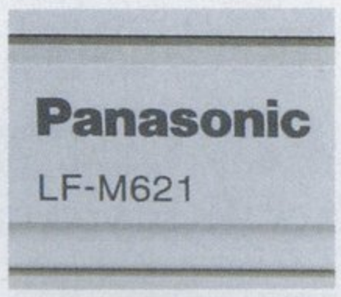
Panasonic LF-M621E Multi DVD Burner

Because the Multi format drives don't do DVD-RAM

There may not seem to be much of a market left for single format DVD burners but so far we haven't seen a multi format drive that does DVD-RAM. Which just so happens to be one of the prime functions of this Panasonic DVD Burner. DVD-RAM, in case you're wondering is a double-sided, re-writable format that allows for 9.4GB of data to be written to one disk and just like RW media, DVD-RAM disks can be formatted and re-written numerous times.

When it comes to DVD-RAM burning, this Panasonic drive is well ahead because the rather clever drive tray can read a conventional 5.25" disk by just plonking it in and yet can still take in the DVD-RAM disk which is housed in a protective cartridge – a real boon for double sided media. Besides the clever engineering of the tray, the LF-M621E can burn A DVD-RAM disk at the 3x speed, which is around 4050KB/sec (4MB/sec) and it's also able to burn all types of –R format such as DVD-R at 4x speed and DVD-RW at 1x speed. Performance wise you're looking at around 18-20 minutes to burn an entire DVD-R and no more than 1 hour to burn an entire 9.4GB DVD-RAM disk which is really quite laudable performance. Read speed is also good as DVD's can be read at 12x speed and CDs at 32x.

The included software is pretty standard as you get DVD authoring software to make your own movies with, B's recording basic and some photo album software. It's your typical drive bundle which allows full use of the drive's functions, without giving your any high-end authoring applications.



→Detail

Max Capacity: 9.4GB
Loading Type: Motorised Tray
Transfer Rate: 66.67Mb/sec (Ultra DMA Mode 4)
Buffer: 2MB Buffer Underrun **protection:** Yes
No. of Rewrites: 100,000 for DVD-RAM, 1000 for DVD-RW
Copyright Protection: Yes (CPRM)
Defect Management: Yes
Access Time: 110M/sec DVD
Interface: E-IDE
Mounting: Horizontal or Vertical
Bonus Media: 1x DVD-RAM, 1 x DVD-R
Software: File safe and B's Recorder Gold/B's Clip 5, DVD Movie Album SE 3, Sonic My DVD, WinDVD
Warranty: 2 Years
Price: $474
Distributor: Panasonic
Web: www.panasonic.com.au
Phone: 133 031

PCGA Verdict

↗ Burns 9.4GB DVD-RAM disks at 3x speed
↙ Only supports the –R format

It's the CDR revolution all over again but now in higher density. DVD burners continue to drop in price and increase in speed as more and more are manufactured. Performing well, especially at 3x speed, for burning DVD-RAM disks this is a recommended drive.

92%

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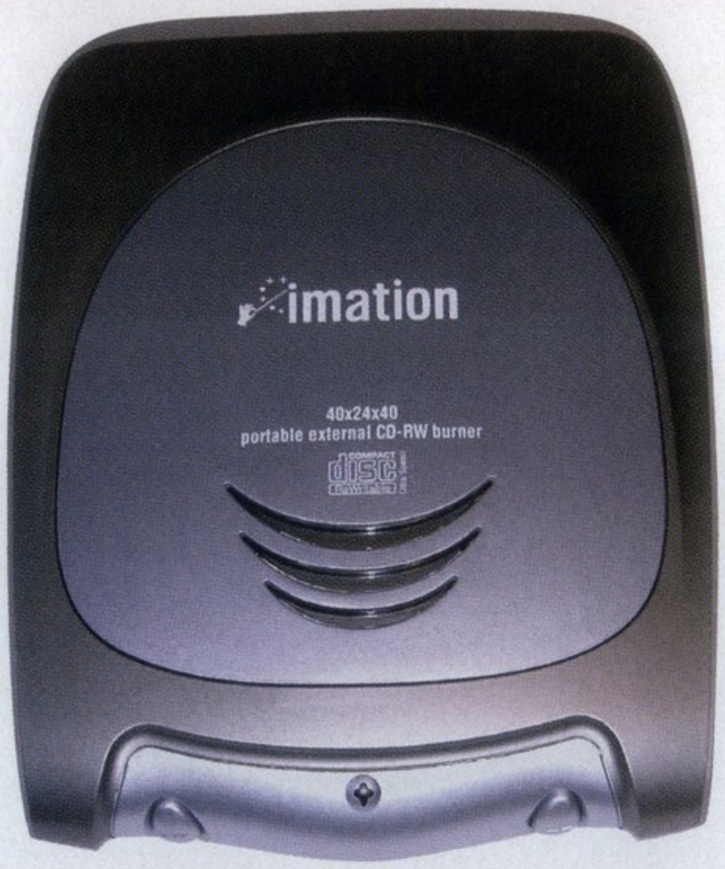


Imation External 40x24x40 CD-RW

Burn CDs on the run, as long as there's power around

One of the most important aspects of an external device is portability, specifically in the age of USB so it's a shame that as yet there isn't a CD-ROM drive out there entirely powered from the USB2 interface. And this is the only problem with this external drive, no matter where you take it you're going to need to find a power point in order to use it.

Otherwise perfectly functional, the Imation drive is relatively attractive with a combination of grey and silver panels. Design wise this drive doesn't use a tray to load a CD but instead is just a matter of popping the lid and inserting the CD like a portable CD player. For anyone who's accidentally destroyed a CD tray, this is a welcome design consideration.

In regard to performance, it's important to ensure that you plug it into a USB2 interface otherwise performance will suffer dramatically. While still not completely able to achieve it's 24x rating the unit averaged a speed of 21.3x under USB2.0. On a standard USB interface though you're only going to achieve a maximum speed of 6x.

The only other real function to mention would be that this drive is firmware upgradeable, meaning that its hardware can learn new tricks by having its BIOS flashed. There's also a headphone out socket on the drive so you can listen to a music CD without your PC being on, though the unit is still going to need to be plugged in.

Provided software is quite good; there's a USB driver for Windows 98 and a copy of Nero Express 5.5 means that there'll never be any problems burning a wide variety of formats to CD. But the biggest factor about this drive is the price. At only $150 it's around half the price of similar offerings available today.

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ Affordable portable writing
- ↙ Needs to be plugged into power to operate

An extremely well priced and speedy external burner

79%

→Detail

Interface: USB2.0 (cable included)
Access Time: 80 msec @ 1/3 stroke
Write Speed: 40x (6 mb/sec)
Rewrite Speed: 24x (3.6 mb/sec)
Read Speed: 40x (6 mb/sec)
Buffer Size: 2MB
Format: CD-DA,CD-ROM,CD-EXTRA, CD-ROM/XA, CD-I, VIDEO-CD, PHOTO-CD, CD-RW
Dimensions: 152 x 198 x 44mm (W x D x H)
Weight: 550g (drive only)
Price: $150
Distributor: Compuparts
Web: www.compuparts.com.au
Phone: (02) 9482 2582

Creative Muvo 2

Move over flash devices, the micro drive is here

Just when you thought that flash memory was the beloved choice of MP3 manufacturers around the world a new invention by IBM/Hitachi has changed everything and pushed us forward again with the micro drive. As somewhere inside the tiny package of the Muvo 2 which is only 60mm (H) x 65mm (W) x 20mm (D) is a tiny hard disk capable of storing 4GB of data. But the best news is that the Muvo 2 works just like a flash device with no need to install transfer software. You just plug it into a USB port and the device installs itself as another hard disk. At this point you can transfer any kind of data you want by just dragging the files onto the micro drive and any MP3/WMA files transferred are automatically registered and added to a playlist.

The last Muvo we reviewed was a little on the quiet side, volume wise, but this has been dutifully addressed. Now able to crank it out at ear-bleeding volumes the Muvo 2 with it's 98dB signal to noise ratio is as clear as a high end amp and the built in graphic equaliser allows for the fine tuning of sound to personal taste.

The controls however leave a little to be desired as the 4-way clickable d-pad requires dexterity to ensure you access the function you want. Also, when the unit is in its clip-on carry case it has to be completely removed to access any kind of function such as volume or track change. The included Lithium Ion battery however is fully rechargeable, and replaceable, so it's possible to carry spare batteries for long journeys away from power. Something that Apple's iPOD can't do, as online protests have proclaimed that once the battery dies, you're expected to buy another iPOD.

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ Massive storage for a tiny amount of space
- ↙ Utilising a hard disk, this MP3 player is considerably more fragile then flash memory offerings

The first of a new wave of MP3 players that feature miniature, high storage hard disks. Able to store 4GB of data and output high quality sound this highly desirable MP3 player truly appears to have it all.

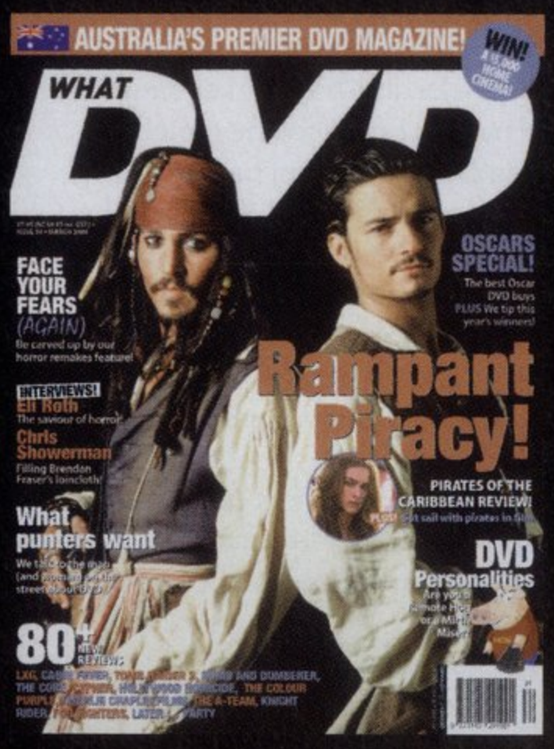
96%

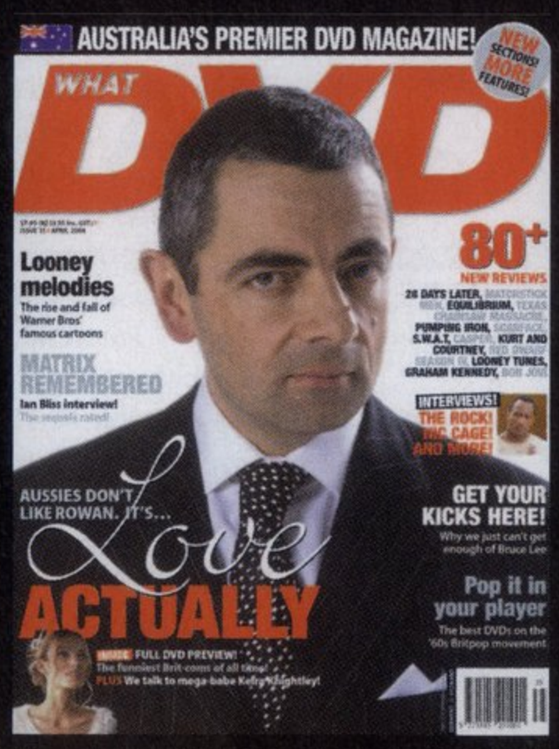
→Detail

Size (WxHxD): 65mm x 60mm x 20mm
Weight: 2.5oz without battery / 3.2oz with battery Storage Capacity: 4GB or 1.5GB hard disk drive
Battery Life: 14hrs of continuous playtime
Playback Formats: MPEG Audio Layer 3 (MP3) and Windows Media™ Audio (WMA)
Signal-to-Noise Ratio: Up to 98dB Harmonic Distortion
Output: · 0.05%
Frequency Response: 20Hz to 20kHz
Headphone Out: 1 x 1/8" stereo minijack, 30mW
Interface : USB2.0 (1.1 backward compatible)
Storage: 4GB - 128hrs of WMA or 64hrs of MP3 tracks
Effects: 4 band custom equalizer and 4 equalizer presets
Battery: Lithium Ion rechargeable through USB or power adaptor
Price: $ 599
Distributor: Creative
Web: australia.creative.com
Phone: (02) 9666 6100

DVD PLAYER HUNGRY?

Get the best menu in town

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Sennheiser PC150 headset

This is ground control to Major ComfortableWedgie

Sennheiser has been the brand of choice for audiophiles around the world. Expanding their markets, the PC150 represents the top of a new range and isn't just a pair of headphones but a headset with attached mike.

Extremely comfortable, the headphone aspect of the headset sits gently on your cranium and can be worn for hours without any fatigue. This is helped by the bridge between the headphones being made of flexible plastic with a comfy foam inlay so that it sits on your head, pillow like. Equally plush and padded are the earpieces themselves which sit gently on your lugs.

Sound quality, as could be expected, is superb and remarkably offers strong powerful bass tones reminiscent of a subwoofer. The clarity of hi-end frequencies is also excellent and there's no discernible hiss, noise or crackle. These headphones also do a great job of silencing the outside world whilst containing the sound within for the consideration of others.

The microphone on the left hand side rotates down and up as needed and records brilliantly, making it excellent for tasks such as voice recognition. This is the only headset you want to be using for reasons of both comfort and quality . The final feature of note is that the cable features a clip on headphones volume control and an on/off switch for the microphone.

→Detail

Frequency response: (headphones) 18 Hz – 22 kHz
Frequency response: (microphone) 80 Hz – 15 kHz
Impedance: 32 ohms
Cable length: 3.0m (0.8 m to volume control, 2.2 m from volume control)
Connectors: 2 x 3.5 mm jack
Pick-up pattern: unidirectional
Sensitivity: –38 dB at 1 V/Pa, 1 kHz
Impedance: approx. 2 kohms
Price: $170
Distributor: PC Casegear
Web: www.pccasegear.com.au
Phone: (03) 9568 0932

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ Superb sound, a quality mike and maximum comfort make this the ultimate communications accessory
- ↙ The microphone isn't detachable, so to use the mike, you have to wear the headset

A great headset that offers excellent sound quality with a well positioned mike that makes this perfect for internet telephony, game comms (roger wilco/teamspeak etc) and voice recognition.

94%

Creative Audigy 2 NX

Why should Desktop users have all the fun?

A good example of a growing market these days would have to be that of the Notebook, but unfortunately, for the most part the sound systems on these units aren't all that could be desired and especially when it comes to presenting, you want to make the biggest impact possible.

For desktop users that want high quality sound between multiple PCs this is achievable with the ultra-portable NX. The actual unit is quite tiny, notably smaller than the Audigy 2 ZS, but this doesn't stop it from achieving full functionality. It offers 24-bit/96kHz playback and recording with a 102dB signal to noise ratio. Also, DVDA (DVD Audio) disks can be played in glorious 5.1/96kHz sound.

The NX is truly feature-rich, with its ability to decode any digital music format such as Dolby, Dolby Digital (EX), DTS and anything in between as long as it doesn't use greater than a 7.1 speaker setup. EAX and the differing effects they can bring to your desktop and gaming. For gaming, you'll have access to the complete range of EAX Advanced HD effects while on a desktop level. You can control the sound with a graphic equaliser or through any number of default effects such as small/large room simulation. On a final (out-of-key) note, there' s the in-built karaoke machine which does a sterling job of stripping vocals out of songs so that you can murder them your own special way.

→Detail

Bit rate: 24-bit, 96kHz
Signal-to-noise ratio: 102dB
Supported formats: DVD-Audio, Dolby Digital Surround EX, DTS, DTS-ES, EAX ADVANCED HD,
Speaker support: 7.1 Speaker Support and backward compatibility to 5.1 speakers and lower
I/O : Line In, Mic In, Optical S/PDIF In, Headphone Out, Optical S/PDIF Out, Coaxial S/PDIF Out and 7.1 channel output (Auto-Jack detects whether 2, 4 or 5.1 speakers are connected and sets itself up accordingly)
Interface: USB 2.0
Price: $299
Distributor: Creative
Web: australia.creative.com
Phone: (02) 9666 6100

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ Excellent and portable sound quality. Ideal for presentations where some 7.1 sound effects can really wow the crowd
- ↙ While the PCI card uses only 2% of the processor, a USB sound card uses around 10%

An excellent portable USB sound card that's ideal for laptop owners who need better quality sound than what is internally offered.

89%

Wireless Desktop Optical Elite

An elite keyboard for the leet

Microsoft's latest consumer keyboard is stylish, solid and this time round the faux leather actually feels like leather. The wireless kit includes a mouse, keyboard and one receiver that functions for both devices and with a range of around 5 metres you can do a little spelunking while using your PC.

The keys are a translucent plastic that although a little off-putting at first, actually serve a purpose. At night the keys capture a lot more light than solid plastic and thus is easier to see in the dark. Along the top of the keyboard is the newly designed multimedia bar which features prominently volume and track controls for media devices. Kudos to Microsoft, these buttons aren't at all flimsy but are housed excellently and respond with a solid, comforting, click. There's also an F-lock key that allows the F-keys to be alternated between normal and Word usage and a scroll/tilt wheel on the left of the keyboard for document navigation. Even though the faux leather actually feels nice and soft, it isn't detachable and thus can't be used with a wrist rest.

The mouse is also good with an ergonomic feel, responsive buttons and a scroll/tilt wheel, but is a tad heavy once the two AA batteries are installed. Wireless performance is good though and almost on par with the Logitech MX700, but you'll find yourself wanting faster responses for gaming. To use this product make sure you stock up on batteries or a recharger because you need 5 in total to power all the devices.

→Detail

Interface: PS/2 for mouse and keyboard
Receiver: Dual input transceiver for mouse and keyboard
Mouse handedness: Ambidextrous
Tilt Wheel: Yes, on mouse and keyboard
Palm rest: Faux leather
Price: $229.95
Distributor: Microsoft
Web: www.microsoft.com.au
Phone: 132 058

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ A well made, durable keyboard which is also great to use, particularly in darkened rooms set up for gaming
- ↙ The mouse still doesn't achieve MX700 performance and the faux leather wristpad isn't detachable

An excellent wireless kit that features a fantastic keyboard and a decent mouse that is only let down by its reliance on AA batteries. Get rechargables though and there's little to complain about here.

91 %

Belkin Nostromo n52 gaming device

Is this the evolution of WASD?

The Nostromo speedpad attempts to create the ultimate left handed setup for mouse driven gaming. That's to say, the purpose of the device is that it can be used as an alternative to the WASD set of keys on the keyboard. The primary component is a three rowed keyboard consisting of 14 keys (2x5, 1x4). The purpose of these keys is to emulate the left hand side of a 101 keyboard but they're moulded in such a way as to facilitate very comfortable use. There's also an eight way D-pad with button and a thumb button.

When using the device despite the keys having a nice "clicky" feel to them the first two rows of keys felt pretty much the same as a keyboard and offered similar gaming results. However, the third row of keys are angled so that they're a lot more accessible and comfortable than that of a keyboard. On the down side, the position of the scroll wheel which is not easily accessible when in the midst of battle.

Design wise, the moulding works well for medium to large hands while the thumb buttons and D-pad are comfortably accessible.. The provided driver software features a nice profile generator that allows all the speedpad's keys to be remapped, but the best thing, is that you don't have to install their software and can just use the pad in default mode which just so happens to be the default controls for 99% of the FPS games out there.

→Detail

Number of buttons: 16
D-pad: yes
Scroll wheel: Yes
Interface: USB
Bundled software: Speedpad macro maker
Price: $69.95
Distributor: Techbuy
Web: www.techbuy.com.au
Phone: (02) 9648 1818

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ The perfect device for anyone that fumbles when using their keyboard whilst first person gaming
- ↙ A little too gimmicky for the hardcore gamer who knows the left hand side of a keyboard like it's an extension of their body

An easy to install device that makes gaming that little more comfortable by moving the prominent FPS gaming keys onto an ergonomic device. Overall it works just fine but the scroll wheel is positioned poorly.

82 %

MODDIN' ART

Where common sense gives way to the authority of aesthetics

UV reactive Molex connectors

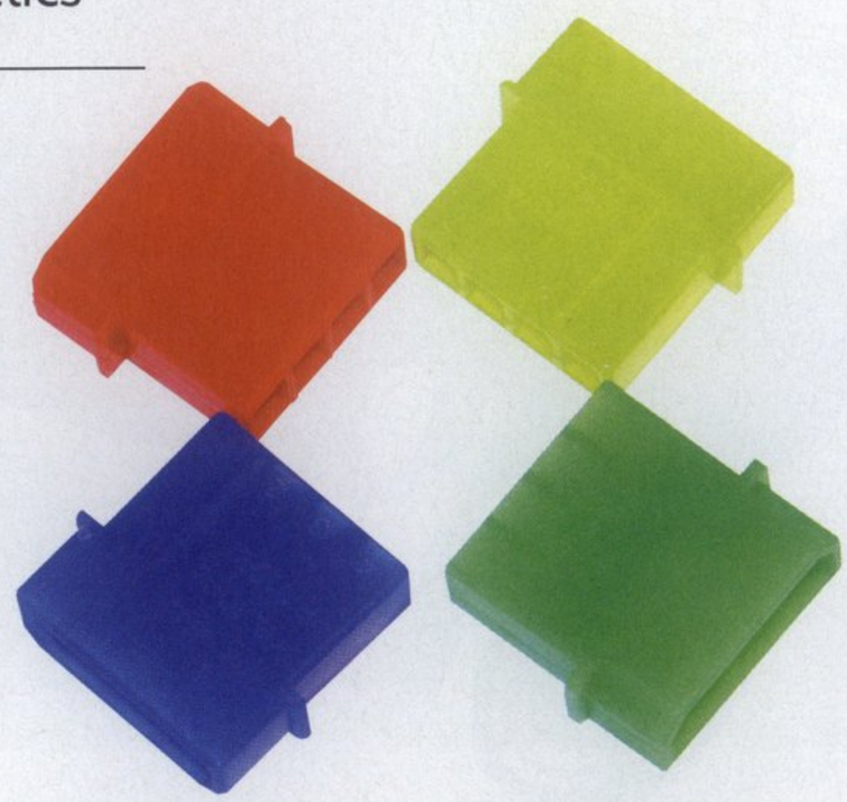
Price: $1.50
Distributor: PC Case Gear
Phone: (03) 9568 0932
PCGA Installation Rating: Difficult without the right tool. De-pinning required.
PCGA Verdict: A stunning means of beautifying one's PC even more.

Available in male or female, the purpose of the UV reactive Molex connector is to finalise a re-cabling kit so that your entire PC can glow eerily from the rays of a UV lamp.

Installation is going to be more fiddly than difficult as you have to de-pin every single wire from the power supply to each connector and then replace it with the UV one. But for every difficult job there's a tool and it's highly recommended that a Molex de-pinning tool be used to avoid insanity.

The result is however fantastic as these connectors glow extremely well under a UV light and as they're available in four different colours, it's possible to make for great themes inside. Anyone considering placing a lamp inside their PC should definitely be giving UV a lot of thought as there are now a number of great UV reactive products available.

They also make for great rave-wear accessories in a pinch. PLUR!



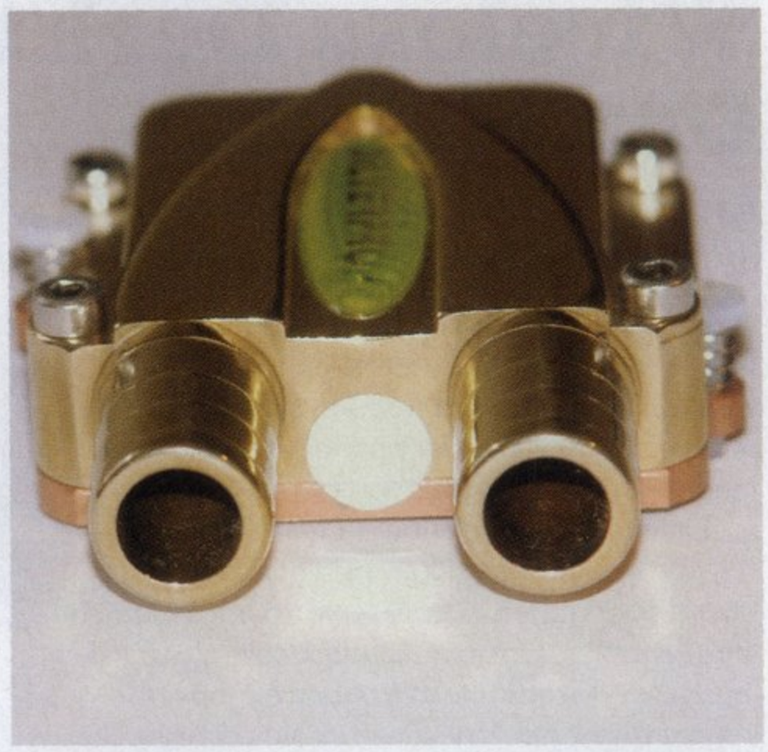
Silverprop GPU Water Cooler

Price: $79.50
Distributor: PC Case Gear
Phone: (03) 9568 0932
PCGA Installation Rating: Difficult. Other parts required such as a pump and involves water around electronic components.
PCGA Verdict: A highly rewarding means of overclocking your video card higher than the designers ever thought possible.

One of the more interesting discoveries made from our look at the new range of high end cards was that the performance increase was primarily caused by an increased core speed. If however you already happen to have a capable DirectX 9 video card then one way of achieving current performance is through the use of a water cooler over the video card's graphics processing unit (GPU).

The 19mm x 50mm x 71mm heat sink features two integrated barb hoses to allow for water to flow in and out and is compatible, out of the box with most ATI Radeon / GFMX cards. For owners with a GeForce 4 or FX though installation involves only the additional step of first installing a clip on the nVIDIA card.

Installation will ultimately be quite difficult because this is a water cooler and all seals, pressure, flow and reservoir need to be installed with extreme care. That said, the water cooling section of PC Casegear's website has everything you can ever need and for that added ultra "leet" touch you can add UV reactive dye to the water, that when used with clear vinyl tubing makes for a fantastic effect.



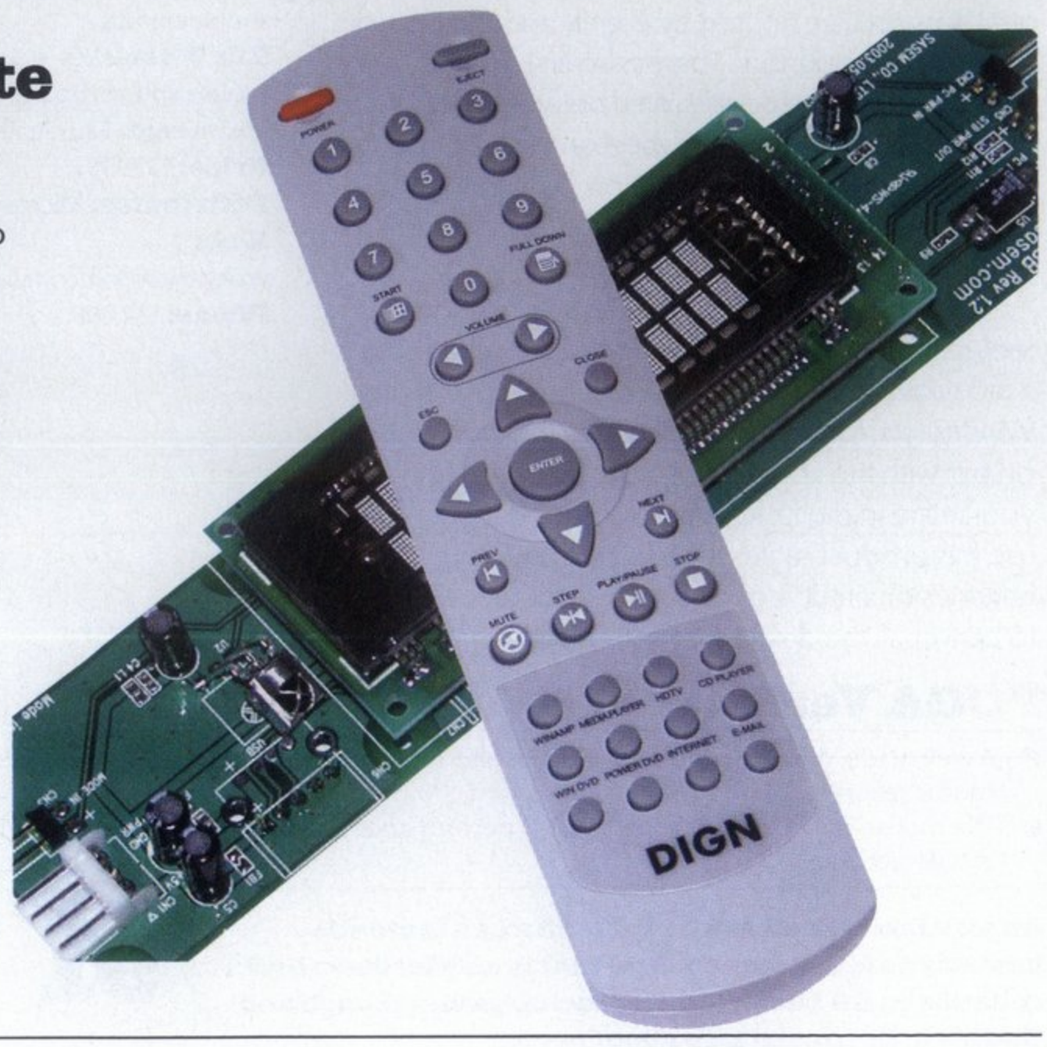
Samsung VFD with Remote

Price: $110
Distributor: PC Case Gear
Phone: (03) 9568 0932
PCGA Installation Rating: Difficult. A window will need to be made in your case to house the LED and drilling is required for a professional looking installation of the USB cable.
PCGA Verdict: Remote control usage and a super bright, high performing LED make this a great purchase for the Home Theatre PC.

An excellent way of turning a Mini system into a fully fledged Home Theatre system is through the use of a remote control - which is what this kit allows you to do. Shipping with the familiar DIGN remote, the receiver allows for a number of Multimedia applications such as Winamp, Power DVD and Win DVD to be started from the remote as well as standard media player commands such as next/previous track.

Installation is quite difficult because the first step involves plugging the 2 x 16 character display into the provided PCB and fitting it into your PC is going to require making a hole for the LED panel to sit into. Once that's done the display plugs into the motherboard switch and takes power from a 3.5" Molex connector. Finally, a USB cable plugs into your machine so that it can start the programs from the remote.

An extravagance perhaps, but holding a grey plastic stick does wonders for making you forget that your PC isn't some swish stand alone piece of AV kit.



PC GAMES addict

YOUR GUIDE TO THE HOT PC GAMES ADDICT APRIL DISCS

FAR CRY

Is the new CryEngine good enough to rival Doom III and Half Life 2? Decide for yourself!

UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2004

Six modes, five maps, countless gibs!

SONIC ADVENTURE DX

The prince of platformers comes over to PC

ON THE CDS

ON CD 1:

PLAYABLE DEMOS
Far Cry
Sonic Adventure DX

MOVIES
Ground Control II

ON CD 2:

PLAYABLE DEMOS
Unreal Tournament 2004
Conan
Hidden & Dangerous II

PATCHES
Chrome 1.1.3.0_v2
Star Wars: KOTOR v1.02

MOVIES
Star Wars: Battlefront

ON THE DVD

PLAYABLE DEMOS
A.I.M.
Chrome
Conan
Far Cry
Hidden & Dangerous II
Jack the Ripper
Painkiller
Prince of Persia: SoT
Sacred
Sonic Adventures DX
Universal Combat
Unreal Tournament 2004
Vietcong: Fist Alpha

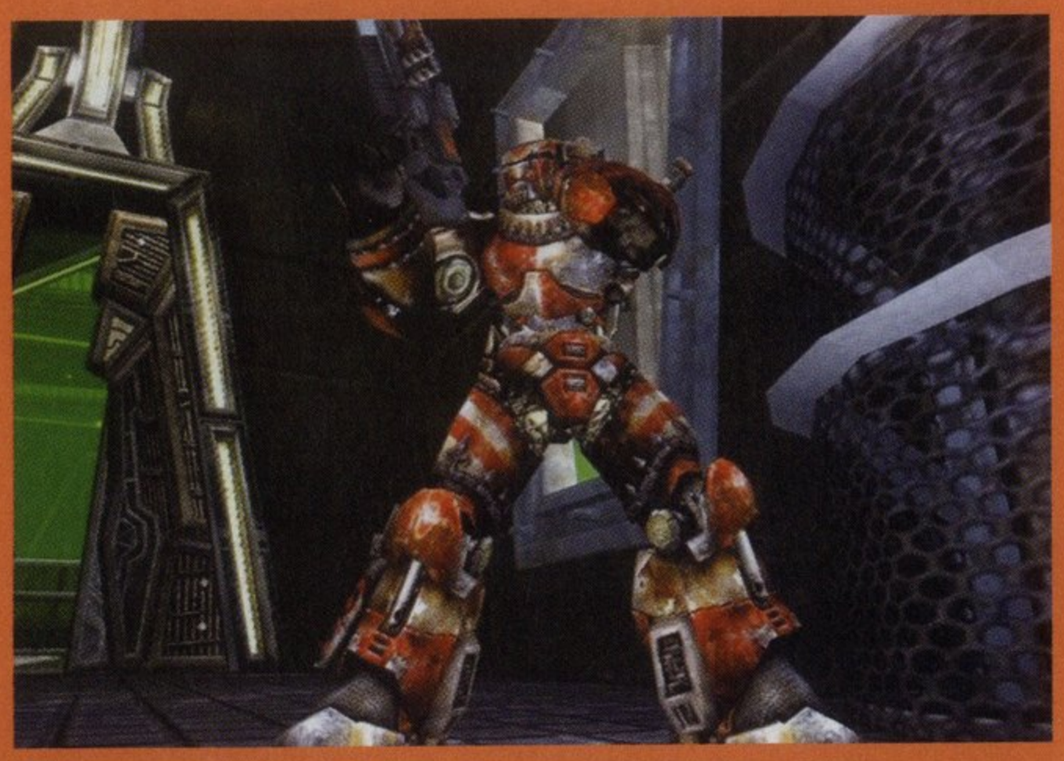
MODS
BF 1942: Wasteland 2042

DRIVERS
ATI Radeon Catalyst 4.2
nVidia Forceview update

MOVIES
Battlefield Vietnam
Ground Control II
LOTR: Battle for Middle Earth
Soldner
Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow
Star Wars: Battlefront
Ultima X - Odyssey

PATCHES
Battlefield 1942 1.6.19
Enemy Territory v102
Halo v1.01
Star Wars: KOTOR v1.02
Vietcong v.161
Worms 3D service patch 1

UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2004



Developer: Epic Games
Publisher: Atari
Size: 209MB
Min. Requirements: 1GHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 64MB 3D Accl. (GeForce 2/Radeon or better), Win98/Me/2K/XP

Rarely does a demo give you this comprehensive a look of the game it represents. While there is only straight deathmatch with a some simplistic bots on the single-player side of things, the multi-player aspects of this demo are indeed fully featured.

Far more than a simple update of *UT2003*, Epic have introduced vehicles and brought back Assault mode from the original *UT* to compliment the other modes: Capture the Flag, Onslaught, Capture the Flag, Bombing Run, DM and Team DM.

To see what's truly new to *UT 2004* we advise you go join an Onslaught server. The sight of the transforming Leviathan vehicle utterly dwarfing the players - or more commonly, smearing them across the battlefields.

Demo Features: All six modes as listed above are included, with five maps to play them on (DM-Rankin serves as the stage for both deathmatch and team deathmatch. Start gibbin'

FAR CRY

Developer: Crytek Studios
Publisher: Ubi Soft
Size: 508MB
Min. Requirements: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, GeForce 3 or better, Win98/ME/2K/XP

FarCry is the debutant title from Crytek studios, and the first title to showcase their 'CryEngine'. Unless you've got a dog of a PC, you'll soon come to the same conclusion we did - This is the most impressive first-person shooter engine to appear outside of one of the established powerhouses of the genre (ie. Id Software, Epic Games, etc).

Just a few minutes with this single-player demo should prove enough to show off the efficient and effective AI, amazing dynamic lighting and shadowing effects and the outstanding feel to the vehicles that populate this prodigous first-person shooter.

One handy tip to keep in mind - If you're being attacked by a boat a LONG way, away, don't think that your rocket launcher can't target it just because it's distant enough to look like background scenery. *Far Cry* handles extreme-range combat with style.

Demo Features: One complete level to play through, which basically involves approaching a tropical island that needs to be liberated from an amassed militia force, fully decked out with vehicles and defensive emplacements. Make it to the top of the hill and seize control of the enemy HQ to win.

CONAN

Developer: Cauldron
Publisher: TDK Interactive
Size: 120MB
Min. Requirements: 1.2GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, GeForce 2 or better 3D Accl., Win98/Me/2K/XP

Hack and slash adentures are far from common, and good ones are as rare as hen's teeth, but *Conan* from TDK looks to be the best thing to hit this niche genre since *Severence: Blades of Darkness* came out years ago.

Although Cauldron insist there are puzzle elements in the final game, this demo is all about showing off the combat system. Working just fine with a multi-button mouse, Conan continually unlocks new combos and attacks as he earns experience points with each foe vanquished.

With different moves for different weapons, there's loads of combat routines to learn.

Demo Features: Battle your way through one full level, battling your way in and out of the temple of an evil cult.
Note: An update for this demo was released just after the CD was mastered. head to **www.conangame.com** for links to download the file.

Star Wars Battlefront Movie

Developer: Pandemic
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Size: 42.4MB

You've seen our cover, read our 10-page feature, so why not see what the fuss is about for yourself? Although it's a tad brief, there's enough here to see that this is no cheap *BF1942* mod force is strong with *Star Wars: Battlefront*.

HIDDEN & DANGEROUS II SINGLE PLAYER DEMO

Developer: Illusion Softworks
Publisher: Gathering of Developers
Size: 184MB
Min. Requirements: 1GHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 32MB 3D Accl, Win98/Me/2K/XP

It's the return of everone's favourite sneaky squad-based SAS sim, *Hidden & Dangerous 2*, and the improvements over its predecessor are obvious.

Also obvious is the lack of improvement in the friendly AI. Even though they can take care of themselves, they can also blow all their ammo too fast or fail to follow simple orders at times. Try before you buy.

Demo Features: One large single-player mission 'Operation Overlord - Blade Dancer' awaits.

PATCHES AND MODS

STAR WARS: KOTOR v1.02
The second patch for *SW:KOTOR* adds numerous improvements such as: use of arrow keys, a walk button, support for 1280 x 1024 resolution, enabling screenshot functions, the ability to give whole stacks of items with one key and more.

CHROME 1.1.3.0_v2
Note that running this update will mean *Chrome* will no longer play save games that have been created under an earlier version of the game. To get around this, go to the main menu, then 'Load', then 'Missions' and finally choose the last mission you were playing.

GROUND CONTROL II: New 'Viron' race movie trailer

Developer: Massive Ent.
Publisher: Vivendi
Size: 23MB

A member of the Swedish developers Massive Entertainment offers us further insight into the new 'Viron' race from their sci-fi RTS epic, *Ground Control II: Operation Exodus*. Perhaps they're a bit of a rip-off of the Protoss from StarCraft, with their abilities to merge into more powerful units, and a basic racial trait of having a low number of high-power troops. Looks lovely.

SONIC ADVENTURE DX

Developer: Sonic Team
Publisher: Atari
Size: 106MB
Min. Requirements: 600MHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 16MB 3D Accl, Win98/Me/2K/XP, DirectX 9

The original prince of console platform games is gracing the PC in a remake of the Dreamcast classic, *Sonic Adventures*. This *DX* (Director's cut) version for PC includes an all-new mission mode that our console cousins didn't get.

Unlike most platform games that just follow the antics of one Disney-like character, there are six playable characters in *SA:DX* including both good guys, villians and even a cat with a fishing rod.

Anyone who is prone to losing time to Tamogotchi-like phenomena should fear the Chao garden in the full version. It's kind of like running a virtual racehorse game, only far more puke-inducingly cute.

Demo Features: Three complete levels are on offer, from three different characters. This gives a good idea of the varying styles of gameplay.

REVIEWED

SPLINTER CELL PANDORA TOMORROW

Hiding in the shadows this last month, we've tracked down the elusive assassin to bring you the definitive review of this superb multiplayer stealth-sim!

NEW ESSENTIAL DEMOS!!
X2: THE THREAT
BATTLEFIELD VIETNAM
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SYBERIA 2

EXCLUSIVE

THE MOVIES

Lights, camera, action! Peter Molyneux's dream project finally gets the PCGA preview treatment.

REVIEWED UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2004, BREED, FAR CRY, JOAN OF ARC, GANGLAND, SOLDNER, COUNTER-STRIKE: CONDITION ZERO AND MORE...
PREVIEWED TOCA RACE DRIVER 2, WARHAMMER: DAWN OF WAR, HITMAN CONTRACTS, EVIL GENIUS, BLACK & WHITE 2, DRAGON EMPIRES AND MORE...

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